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**SYMBOLISM AND SOURCES IN THE PAINTING
AND POETRY OF
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI**

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Glasgow in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The Thesis examines the symbolism, and the sources of that symbolism, in the poetry and painting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Chapter 1 considers the significance of the title of Rossetti's sonnet-sequence *The House of Life*. Chapter 2 looks at the opening sonnets of that sequence. Chapter 3 scrutinises the sonnet quartet of the *Willow-wood* sequence. Chapter 4 evaluates the influence of Platonism and Neoplatonism in Rossetti's art. Chapter 5 is concerned with Rossetti's use of allegory. Chapter 6 surveys the influence of Rosicrucianism on Rossetti and his immediate circle of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and on the Aesthetic School that succeeded it. This chapter closely examines the symbolic motifs of Rosicrucianism, and how these may be traced in the paintings of these artists. Chapter 7 explores the Rosicrucian influence in Rossetti's poetry. Chapter 8 further traces these influences in Rossetti's painting. Chapter 9 investigates the Goddess figure within Rossetti's later paintings.

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is one of the best documented of all nineteenth century artists, thanks to William Rossetti's devoted record-keeping on all matters pertaining to his family, and Dante Gabriel's romantic reputation which drew a number of his wide circle of associates into print after his death. Rossetti's fame, based upon the extravagant and even notorious rumours which surrounded him, largely eclipsed in the popular imagination the talents of his former friends Holman Hunt, Millais, Burne-Jones, Morris, Swinburne, and Bell Scott.

After Rossetti's death, his close friend Theodore Watts-Dunton (then named Theodore Watts), was expected by the Rossetti family to write the 'official' biography. This he never did, and the gap was later filled by William Rossetti. William Bell Scott commented that this biography diminished Dante Gabriel: 'Perhaps you know that everything printed about the dear old pagan DGR passes through the hands of WMR and gets emasculated if anything crops up about his private history. I remonstrated with William about this on the ground that he made his brother an infinitely less interesting man than he really was.'¹ Watts-Dunton's reason for not writing a biography was that he believed that Rossetti was best portrayed through his works: 'let him [the reader] forget if he can most of the Rossetti letters that have been published, and let him read the poet's poems and study the painter's pictures, and he will know Rossetti ... as intimately as it is possible to know any man whose biography is written only in his works.'² He no doubt recognised that the term 'autopsychology', which Rossetti had applied to Dante's *Vita Nuova*,³ applied equally as well to Rossetti's own works.

The focus of this thesis is on the intellectual life which informed Rossetti's work, and which in turn leads us to a better understanding of the man who created it. Without

¹ Brian and Judy Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977), p.171.

² Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Old Familiar Faces* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916), p.111.

³ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Introduction to Part I of 'Dante and His Circle: With the Italian Poets Preceding Him (1100-1200-1300)', in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti, 2 vols (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886), II, 1. Hereafter referred to as '*Works*'.

exception writers on both the poetry and painting of Rossetti acknowledge his use of symbolism, but little attempt is made to explicate it.¹ My aim is to show that Rossetti's symbolism provides, from an early stage, a coherent and consistent system within his art, whether written or painted. For instance, his first oil painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849, was accompanied by two sonnets entitled *Mary's Girlhood (For a Picture)*, the second of which opens, 'These are the symbols', and goes on to explain them. With this, Rossetti instigates a practice that he followed throughout his career. The aim of this thesis is to examine and identify this symbolic language and its sources. Rossetti's symbols compose a language-system with its own syntax and semantics, and I

¹ For instance, in Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1949), p.7, the author writes: 'the true significance of much of his work could not be perceived, and consequently, even to the present day, much of the accepted criticism of Rossetti's verse is mistaken'. Fredeman writes: 'certainly the symbols and vocabulary are part of that inexplicable Rossettian magic that attends his pictures and poems, defying precise definition': William E. Fredeman, 'Introduction: "What is wrong with Rossetti": A Centenary Reassessment', *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (Special Rossetti Issue, nos. 3 and 4) 1982, xv-xxviii (p.xxviii). Ford Madox Hueffer, *Rossetti: A Critical Essay on his Art* (London: Duckworth, 1902), p.47, writes that Rossetti was 'beguiled into so filling them with objects decorated, that the pictures look like pieces of decorative work ... These undoubtedly are defects'. Weatherby states: 'one feels again that Rossetti is simply decorating, as if he were unable, in the absence of an inherited and believed theological structure like that which sustains Dante ... which is absolutely necessary for the kind of love poetry which *The House of Life* attempts to be': Harold L Weatherby, 'Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *VP*, 2 (1964), 11-19 (p.16). Graham Hough writes: 'the mere romantic confusion of unrelated notions that could only have made sense if fitted into some coherent scheme of belief': Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics*, (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1949), p.77. WW Robson states: 'This is religiosity: the use of religious language for evocative purposes, by a man to whom real religion means nothing': WW Robson, 'Pre-Raphaelite Poetry', in *From Dickens to Hardy: The Penguin Guide to English Literature*, VI, ed. by Boris Ford (London: 1982), pp.353-370 (p.358). Wilmer states: 'Aestheticism, though it expresses a religious sensibility, is as far removed from actual religion as it is possible to be': *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Selected Poems and Translations*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1991), p.16. Hillis Miller writes: that Rossetti's 'signs are cut off from any extralinguistic grounding and become fascinating in themselves, in their self-sustaining and self-annihilating interplay. ... [the moment] engages the signs of something missing, that is, signs as such. The sign by definition is the presence of an absence. There is nothing beyond such a moment': J Hillis Miller, 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *VP*, 29 (1991), 333-349 (p.345). Books on Rossetti as a painter, while pointing out examples of his symbolism, generally do not analyse it in any detail: for instance Alicia Craig Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1989), and Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987). In an exhibition important in collecting together lesser-known examples of Aesthetic art (including examples by Rossetti and Burne-Jones), *Heaven on Earth*, at the Djanogly Art Centre, University of Nottingham, and in its accompanying catalogue, the organisers / authors fail to stress the fundamental Platonic origins of the Victorian 'Cult of Beauty', much less the Rosicrucian symbolism inherent in such art: Gail-Nina Anderson and Joanne Wright, *Heaven on Earth: The Religion of Beauty in Late Victorian Art* (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery, University of Nottingham Arts Centre / Lund Humphries, 1994).

will attempt to show that it is a system derived from a well established, though generally unfamiliar, tradition.

In order to place Rossetti's symbolism in context, we need to look to the past. In the art and literature of the Middle Ages, the symbolic worlds of religion, magic, and superstition overlap and walk hand-in-hand with the physical world. The marvellous overflows into the actual. The art of the Renaissance is replete with allegory, symbol, and hieroglyph, all pointing to different and higher states of mind and being. In the much later art of William Blake, we are presented with worlds inhabited by angelic presences and spiritual beings. In neither the art of the Renaissance nor of Blake, do we question that an alternative language in the form of symbol is present, or that the artist is drawing upon accepted symbolic traditions and employing them in his work. However, when we reach the area of late nineteenth century art, even where a symbolic method is recognised, it has not been the subject of intensive scholarly investigation. This thesis attempts to redress the balance.

Rossetti clearly stands apart from his contemporaries in his unique vision, both in his writings and in his artworks. In his later life, as his influence spread, he gained imitators. Through his friends and pupils Edward Burne-Jones (then plain Edward Jones) and William Morris, a new school of Aesthetic art developed in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Although there were cross-currents between this later school and the European Symbolists, the British Aesthetes largely retained a distinctive vision of their own. The Aesthetes, as their title implies, based their art on a cult of Beauty which ultimately derives from Plato. Although they used symbolism extensively, they were not Symbolists in the European sense.¹ An understanding of Rossetti's work is the key to a comprehension of this later school of art. Kathleen Raine, in her studies of William Blake and WB Yeats,² charts the sources and traditions from which both drew, and which provided the essential symbolic language they used in their work. This

¹ For a working definition and account of Symbolism in Europe, see *Le Symbolisme en Europe*, exhibition catalogue, (Grand Palais, Paris, 1976); P Jullian and A Bowness, *French Symbolist Painters* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1972); R Goldwater, *Symbolism* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

² Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes of WB Yeats* (Mountrath, Ireland: Dolmen Press; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986). This collection of essays is as much about Blake as it is about Yeats.

thesis will seek to demonstrate that Rossetti stood in a direct line between these two artists, and drew from precisely the same traditions.¹

In his youth, Mediaevalism exercised the most profound intellectual influence upon Rossetti. His primary interest during his teenage years was in Dante (after whom his father had named him), and the poetic tradition of the Troubadours. Rossetti's researches into obscure texts in the British Library produced his translations from the early Italian poets, which he later published as his first collected work in 1861. Around the years 1859-62, he became increasingly receptive to the influence of the Renaissance, and this becomes apparent in the style of both his writing and painting from this time onwards. A third area of influence, that of Rosicrucian alchemy and its symbolic language may be added to this, as I shall demonstrate. Rossetti employed a symbolic language that was well established but had largely been discarded and forgotten.

During the Renaissance, a symbolic language of allegory and pageant was common throughout Europe, despite religious differences. This language of court art was more a symbolic aesthetic of idea and reference rather than a literal representation of reality. The iconoclastic idealism of the Commonwealth and the foundation of the Royal Society under the patronage of Charles II marked the triumph of the empirical method. This was the age of reason, not imagination; of science, not mysticism.² Essentially this new attitude firmly re-established the Aristotelian 'organon' - a tool for the descriptive communication of facts and arguments - as opposed to the Platonic ideal in which language functions symbolically through simile and metaphor.³ This disposition became

¹ WB Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1956), p.550, states that Blake, Puvis de Chavannes, Rossetti, Watts, Gustave Moreau, etc., did not create a 'universal language', but were 'Administrators of tradition'. Elsewhere (pp.115-16), Yeats writes: 'I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition ... passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians'.

² It has to be admitted that even here a degree of ambivalence and ambiguity of intention and method existed: these were times of transition in which the edges of distinction and definition were constantly blurred. It was a moment of the redefinition of the human outlook on the universe around it.

³ See EH Gombrich, *Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and their bearing on Art*, in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), pp.190-1: 'It was the Platonists who made man feel the inadequacy of 'discursive speech' for conveying the experience of a direct apprehension of truth and the 'ineffable' intensity of the mystic vision. It was they, also, who encouraged a search for alternatives to language in symbols of sight and sound which could at least offer a simile for that immediacy of experience which language could never offer. It was this attitude too that encouraged the Romantic to seek instruction from the child, the dreamer and the

irreversibly entrenched under the Hanoverian succession: the Protestant ethic was based firmly on reality, labour, and the creation of material wealth. This outlook was reflected in British art until the Romantic period, when artists and writers such as Blake, Turner, Shelley, and Coleridge, sought another vision entirely. It was the Romantic literature of the picturesque and the 'gothic' that Rossetti loved as a child. His uncle, John Polidori, had travelled with Byron as his physician, and was the author of *The Vampyre*, a tale attributed for some time to Byron. However, the Victorian psyche was schizophrenic: the British character was (and still is) basically phlegmatic and pragmatic; the Empire was founded on military power and scientific advancement; this was the age of the machine and the factory, of the manipulation, transformation, and fabrication of material substances as the foundation of capitalistic wealth. Yet, beneath this emphasis on the immediate and the real, there was in the Victorian psyche a distinct tendency towards the spiritual, the macabre, and the supernatural. This was the great age of church building and of the ghost story, and where angelic presences overwatched the child. Victorian art in general does not celebrate the age of the machine and advancing technology, but rather turns its back upon it.

Preraphaelite painting might at first sight appear to be committed to the literal representation of reality in its obsessive depiction of minutiae. But herein lies a paradox. This super-realism is not dedicated to the depiction of material reality alone, but rather points to the supernatural animation of Nature by God. This attitude is often derived from Ruskin's teachings, but behind Ruskin lies an older tradition which stems from the German mystic schools of Jacob Boehme and his contemporaries, the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Boehme, like St Paul, was dazzled by sunlight which induced a visionary insight, in which he saw all creation transfigured in its true splendour. Both Boehme and the Rosicrucians taught that God revealed himself in two texts, in the Bible and in the book of Nature. Light, as in the paintings of Turner - those paintings which had first

primitive who must have known the world before it was strained through the filter of language. ... But maybe it is only by learning to appreciate the marvel of language that we can also learn to understand the growth of those alternative systems of metaphor which make great art more profound than any mystic hieroglyph can ever be.'

inspired Ruskin¹ - must be seen in Preraphaelite painting to carry a religious or mystical charge. Hunt and Millais invented the technique of painting on a wet white ground in order to produce the most intense jewel-like colours possible.² Light is the supernature of God himself. This is, in origin, a Rosicrucian concept derived from Plato and the Cabala. Like Boehme's vision of Nature, the Preraphaelite concentration on super-detail defined by light, is produced by, and is intended to communicate to the viewer, a revelation of God in Nature, expressed through sign, symbol, and signature.³

Rossetti was a copious reader from an early age and he developed a penchant for the bizarre, the peculiar, and the supernatural. Besides delighting in popular 'gothic' literature, he had access to the arcane literature so avidly studied by his father in the pursuit of his Dante studies. This delight in literary arcana was to continue throughout his life, and he was to find fellow enthusiasts in Swinburne and Morris. Dunn, Rossetti's studio assistant, writes: 'the interest displayed by Rossetti in everything leaning on the occult gave me an insight into his nature and however trivial these relations may appear they showed how largely both his poetry and his painting was influenced by the bent of mind in that direction and his yearnings for the unseen'.⁴ Pater similarly states: 'his work, it must be conceded, certainly through no narrowness or egotism, but in the faithfulness of a true workman to a vocation so emphatic, was mainly of the esoteric order'.⁵ Occultism thus forms a strong element in Rossetti's work, and in this thesis I

¹ 'Pre-Raphaelitism and Raphaelitism, and Turnerism, are all one and the same ... because so by painting the truths around them as they appeared to each man's own mind, not as he had been taught to see them, except by the God who made both him and them': John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851), p.59.

² It would seem that this technique was invented to mimic the practice of mediaeval fresco painting; that is, pigment applied to damp plaster. However, it will be observed that there is a considerable difference between the end results of these two methods. The PRB technique much more closely mimics the effect of light (the light of God) passing through stained glass (in which colour represents the varying densities of matter in Nature).

³ This recreates Boehme's vision; he 'went forth into the open fields, and there perceived the wonderful or wonderworks of the Creator in the signatures, shapes, figures, and qualities of all created things, very clearly and plainly laid open'. Quoted by Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, 'Rosicrucian Linguistics: Twilight of a Renaissance Tradition', in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Ingrid Merkel and Allen G Debus (Washington: Folger Books, 1988), pp.311-341 (p.319).

⁴ Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle: Or Cheyne Walk Life*, ed. by Rosalie Mander (Westerham: Dalrymple Press, 1984), p.53.

⁵ Walter Pater, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', in *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1883), pp.228-242 (p.242).

examine its importance. While I recognise the dangers inherent in such a study, we should not be afraid to confront such a topic. Timothy Neat, in his book on Mackintosh defines the problem:

The vague and sometimes frightening facts of occult practice are not usually seen as profitable areas of study for any serious artist, and art historians remain sensibly anxious to give themselves and their subject documentary respectability within an academic framework they would like to claim as watertight as good science. Thus they stay clear of such mysticism. Despite this there can be no doubt that spiritualism and mysticism of various kinds were of great importance to many of the artists, writers and musicians whose work and discoveries created Modernism and who have so fundamentally shaped Western culture in the twentieth century.¹

The writings of Wind and Gombrich upon the influence of magical practices on the art of the Renaissance have been influential, and those of Frances Yates inspired an intense flurry of interest in Hermeticism and the occult during the same period and extending into the seventeenth century. But this approach has not been applied to the art of the nineteenth century, where it seems equally appropriate. The specialist studies of Frances Yates have provided an illuminating historical insight into the murky and ill-defined areas of European intellectual and occult thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. AE Waite's works on Rosicrucianism also provide a thorough historical documentation of this phenomenon. While both supply a reliable historical basis, neither attempt to assess or define the core beliefs or mythologies of Rosicrucianism - that is, the very fabric of its philosophy (or more precisely, theosophy). A further obstacle is that the tradition with which we are dealing is a sealed one which deliberately attempts to withhold its secrets: alchemy, for instance, disguises its wisdom beneath a bewildering,

¹ Timothy Neat, *Part Seen, Part Imagined: Meaning and Symbolism in the Work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1994), p.124. In this book, Neat demonstrates the influence of both Rossetti and Rosicrucianism on the work of Mackintosh, but does not draw the connection between Rosicrucianism and Rossetti.

and sometimes impenetrable, array of symbol, allegory, and metaphor. With recourse to sources published during and shortly after Rossetti's lifetime, allied with a certain degree of reconstruction, I attempt to redress this balance. It is an exploration of these areas of thought in the art of Rossetti, and the sources from which they derive, that forms the scope of this thesis.

The Rossetti family as a whole were intensely literary, and this reveals itself in the work of Dante Gabriel. The sources from which he was drawing were almost entirely literary ones. Thus the easiest access to Rossetti's ideas is through his writings, but in Rossetti, as I will show, a common system of symbolism informs both the poems and the paintings.

Rossetti's aim, I will argue, is similar to, and may have been inspired by, the objectives of Renaissance mystics such as Giordano Bruno. In exile from his mother country Italy - he was incidentally born at Nola, not far from Naples, the same area as Gabriele Rossetti - Bruno travelled north into Germany, and his teachings during his sojourn there almost certainly lay behind the creation of the Rosicrucian Fraternity. Bruno's overriding aim was to create a universal religion, and the echoes of this pass through the centuries until, as I shall demonstrate, they resurface in the works of Rossetti. Besides Bruno, Rossetti has sources in Platonism; in mediaeval Romance, in which mythological allegory plays a vital role; in Renaissance Neoplatonism; in alchemy; in the scholarly investigations of myth and religion in the latter part of the eighteenth century; and finally, in the classical education of the nineteenth century.

It will be seen from this catalogue that Rossetti's sources are not only vastly eclectic, but also widely scattered. The need to provide a thorough assessment of what are, in some areas, remarkably obscure topics - for instance the beliefs and symbolism of Rosicrucianism - require a degree of patience, and even imagination, on the part of the reader. It may thus seem at times that the course of this thesis is wandering far from Rossetti. I hope that the reader will conclude that there is an inevitable necessity for this. Having laid this groundwork, I shall proceed to demonstrate how the precise and specific symbolism of the Hermetic tradition provides both a vital element and a key interpretative function within Rossetti's art.

We are inevitably drawn to speculate upon Rossetti's purpose for incorporating such specific symbolism within his painting and poetry. For instance, was he using it purely on an eclectic basis because all such obscure and occult notions fascinated him? Or was it perhaps that he was using it with creative purpose, reviving the codified language of former times to recommunicate its perennial message? The two are not necessarily incompatible. There are no immediate or conclusive answers to these questions. Contemporary records and accounts have been meticulously edited to avoid any such sensitive implications - there was an embarrassing number of these within Rossetti's life already, without adding more. The real Rossetti stands carefully hidden behind the facade presented by his family, friends, and associates. However, from those quotations I use in the text, some faint traces are discernible, I believe, to indicate some deeper degree of both knowledge and intent on Rossetti's part. Ultimately, the reader will have to come to his or her own conclusions based on the material presented.

CHAPTER 1

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE *THE HOUSE OF LIFE*.

The title of Rossetti's personal testament, *The House of Life*, at first sight appears a meaningless enigma. However, once it has been understood in its correct context, it provides a catalogue of references which are the key to the contents of the work as a whole. The phrase 'the House of Life' provides a coherent introduction to the themes that follow. Similarly, this chapter provides a short introduction to the themes of the following chapters, where they are expanded upon in greater detail. William was aware of the problem of interpretation within the work as a whole when he wrote:

I have more than once been told that the verses by my brother which compose (as he termed it) 'a Sonnet-sequence,' under the aggregate title of *The House of Life*, are very difficult of interpretation. Not long ago one of his most intimate friends put it to me pointedly in the phrase 'They cannot be understood.' I should like them to be understood ... I have thought it not inconsistent with respect to my brother's memory ... that I should take it upon me to expound their meaning.¹

William suggests an interpretation of the title:

I am not aware that any question has been raised as to the meaning of the title *The House of Life*; nor did I ever hear any explanation of it from my brother. He was fond of anything related to astrology or horoscopy - not indeed that he ever paid the least detailed or practical attention to these obsolete speculations; and I understand him to use the term *The House of Life* as a zodiacal adept uses the term 'the house of Leo.' As the sun is said to be 'in the house of Leo,' so (as I construe it) Rossetti indicates 'Love, Change, and Fate,' as being 'in the House

¹ William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* (London: Cassell, 1889), p.179. Hereafter referred to as *Designer and Writer*.

of Life'; or, in other words, a Human Life is ruled and pervaded by the triple influence of Love, Change, and Fate.¹

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born on 12th May 1828. The sun on this date was in the House of Taurus, which is ruled by the planet Venus. Rossetti noted: 'I myself was born on old May Day ('12') in the year (1828) after that in which Blake died.'² This comment is interesting because Rossetti associates his birth with May Day (the significance of which will become apparent later), and the death of Blake. The suggestion is that Rossetti perhaps saw himself as some form of reincarnation of Blake.³ The birth date of Dante is not known for certain, but tradition places it on 14th May 1265. In his comment, Rossetti shows himself fully aware of the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which took place in 1582 in Catholic countries, and 1752 in Protestant England and Scotland, and which removed eleven days from the year. This would place Dante's original birthdate around 25th May. Dante states that he was born under the sign of Gemini, which would comply with this.⁴ What is important is that Rossetti is associated by birthdate in with two of the major influences in his life and art.

The Influence of Dante's *New Life*.

The closeness of these birthdates must have been recognised by the Rossetti family in general, and by Gabriele in particular, and this would account for the infant Rossetti being christened with the name of the great poet as well as that of his father. It is possible that Gabriele may have seen it as some sort of omen, as Rossetti may perhaps be implying in *Dantis Tenebrae*. Certainly there was from birth an implicit link existing

¹ Ibid, p.183.

² Hall Caine, *Recollections of Rossetti* (London: Cassell, 1928), p.17.

³ This is noted by Rosalie Glynn Grylls, *Portrait of Rossetti* (London: Macdonald, 1964), p.19: 'The luck of Rossetti in being offered the book [Blake's notebook] has suggested some mystical connection between the two painter-poets, for Rossetti was born exactly nine months after Blake's death and was to be connected with writing his biography years later.'

⁴ The sun passes into Gemini around May 21. In *Paradiso*, Canto XXII.110-123, Dante acknowledges that 'whatsoever genius is mine' derived from the time when 'Your region was appointed my abode'; that is, his birth under Gemini which is ruled by Mercury, the god of learning and communication. Dante, *The Portable Dante*, ed. by Paolo Milano (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp.483-4: all quotations from the *Divine Comedy* are taken from this volume. While this volume also contains Rossetti's translation of the *Vita Nuova*, all quotations from that work are taken from *Works*, II.

between Gabriele and his work on Dante and his son, of which inheritance Rossetti was conscious throughout his life.

In Rossetti's story *St Agnes of Intercession*, the young painter finds the events of his own life supernaturally interwoven with those of a painter and his model living four hundred years previously, a veiled confession, perhaps, of Rossetti's extreme sympathy with the Italian poet. There can be no doubt that Rossetti associated himself and the tragic Elizabeth Siddal with Dante and Beatrice, as is most poignantly illustrated by his painting *Beata Beatrix*, (1864).¹ The underlying supernatural element of *How They Met Themselves*, (1851, 1860),² also depicts this.

The House of Life is both a homage to, and Rossetti's version of, Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Both works share the central theme of the transforming potential of love, which facilitates a rebirth of the soul into 'the New Life.' It is around this theme that Rossetti constructs his *House of Life*. Both works similarly confront the effects on the individual of the loss of the beloved, although the love inspired by her remains and is subject to transmutations of its own within the person of the poet. In Dante this was manifested in a vow to write about Beatrice that which had never before been written of a woman,³ a vow fulfilled in *The Divine Comedy*. Rossetti's *House of Life* is no less a voyage of spiritual self-discovery, but Rossetti leaves us, not with the certainty of transcendental illumination, but with an almost overwhelming doubt which is only countered by the bloom of Hope. Both works conclude with this image of the sacred flower in which resides the mystery of the Godhead. Yet, for Rossetti, the attainment of this remains no more than the 'One Hope'.

Rossetti could not re-create Dante's divine journey. However much Rossetti and his friends tried to revive the mediaeval atmosphere, they were nonetheless products of their own century. Rossetti was aware of this: 'Of this order of poetic action, - the omnipotent freewill of the artist's mind, - our curbed and slackening world may seem to have seen the last.'⁴ Even to the Neoplatonic poets of Renaissance Florence, for whom

¹ Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882): A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). Surtees lists the works by catalogue number in volume 1 (text), and by plate number in volume 2 (plates), and not by page number. All references are given (as for this painting): Surtees Cat. no. 168, plate 238. Tate Gallery.

² Surtees Cat. no. 118, plate 182. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

³ In the last passage of the *Vita Nuova*: 'Wherefore if it be His pleasure through whom is the life of all things, that my life continue with me a few years, it is my hope that I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman.' *Works* II, 95.

⁴ *Works*, I, 500.

the theme of the journey of the soul was a familiar stock in trade, this idiom had already become worn. In *The House of Life*, it is Rossetti's aim to re-invent Dante's journey of the soul by liberating it from the confines of the creed and dogma of a purely Catholic Christian context to that of a broader universal theosophy which is expressed through a purely symbolic medium. *The House of Life* is Rossetti's attempt to create a 'universal religion' through the symbolic language of the soul in the second half of the nineteenth century. As one would expect, this is an eclectic language. *The House of Life*, like much Victorian architecture, ultimately represents its age through a process of eclectic borrowing from many different historical periods.¹

We should note that Rossetti's interest in Dante was almost exclusively centred on the *Vita Nuova* rather than the *Divine Comedy*. The exceptions to this are the paintings of Dante's reunion with Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1849-50, 1859,² and the small watercolour, *Dante's Vision of Rachel and Leah*, 1855,³ both of which are taken from Dante's *Purgatory*. The latter was undertaken reluctantly as one of a series of suggestions selected from the *Divine Comedy* by Ruskin. This was the only one completed,⁴ and it would not have been so but for the enthusiasm of Ford Madox Brown, who suggested to Rossetti that he include the figure of Dante in the background as a means of encouraging his flagging spirits over the painting.

In *The House of Life*, as in the *Vita Nuova*, the beloved functions both as herself and in the representation of an idea, although William denies that this was Rossetti's understanding of Dante:

I have always been in a state of some mental suspense as to Beatrice; seeing some strong reasons for assuming her to be a real woman, and other strong reasons for assuming her to be (as my father contended) a merely symbolic

¹ *The House of Life*, 'is a nineteenth-century creation, a new and powerful replacement of that vocabulary of conceits and images which Petrarch bequeathed to contemporaries and successors, thereby enabling them to express themselves more intimately than ever before. *The House of Life* with its introspection and its use of the old pattern of frustrated love is in the spirit of the medieval and renaissance poems though the heart and mind which are unlocked are those of a modern man subject to all the influences of a very different society': Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.165.

² Surtees Cat. nos. 116 and 116A, plates 172 and 173. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, respectively.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 74, plate 82. Tate Gallery.

⁴ Surtees lists another subject, *Dante's Vision of Matilda Gathering Flowers*, Cat. no. 72, although little about it, including its present whereabouts, is known.

personage. My brother was entirely for the real woman, scouting and ignoring any arguments to the contrary.¹

This is not borne out within *The House of Life*, where, as in the *Vita Nuova*, the nature of the beloved is entirely ambiguous. Whether she is woman, symbol, or Goddess is in a sense entirely immaterial, and to choose between the possibilities is to miss the point. As in the Christian Trinity, these three aspects of the feminine principle co-exist in a central unity within the works of both Dante and Rossetti, just as they did in the poetic traditions from which they both drew.

It is significant that Rossetti loses interest in the figure of Beatrice after her reunion with Dante in the Earthly Paradise. This is the point at which the quest for love is fulfilled, a point where the figures of Beatrice and the Blessed Damozel briefly overlap. Significantly, it is also the point where William's quotation, above, and Rossetti's true artistic intention coincide. For it is here that Beatrice still retains the last earthly vestiges of Rossetti's 'True Woman', that is, woman and symbol combined. It is in the Earthly Paradise that we find Dante's use of the 'House of Life' motif in the words that Beatrice addresses to Dante:

Nature or art never to thee assured
Such pleasure as the fair limbs that did house
My spirit, and now are scattered and interred.²

The Earthly Paradise is, as Rossetti has inscribed on his painting of the subject, 'Hortus Eden', or paradise regained. This dream of *apocatastasis* I shall later show to be an important Neoplatonic and Rosicrucian motif. Beyond this, in the realm of Dante's *Paradise*, the figure of Beatrice becomes a cipher that has no meaning for Rossetti. Here, she is no longer the combination of woman with symbol, she is symbol alone.

¹ William Michael Rossetti, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism* (London: George Allen, 1899), p.262. William continues here with several pages of notes, in which he lists examples of 'Natural Symptoms' and 'Allegorical Symptoms' of the nature of Beatrice, along with the symbolic 'No.9', in a 'genuine attempt to arrive at an opinion'. As usual with William, the reader is left none the wiser as to his true conclusions.

² *Purg.* XXXI.49.

Rossetti will not abandon the part of the woman that consists of her earthly body as well as her spirit. WB Yeats perceptively noted that:

if he painted a woman's face he painted it in some moment of intensity when the ecstasy of the lover and of the saint are alike, and desire becomes wisdom without ceasing to be desire. He listens to the cry of the flesh till it becomes proud and passes beyond the world where some immense desire that the intellect cannot understand mixes with the desire for a body's warmth and softness.¹

This is demonstrated in the opening sonnets of *The House of Life*, as for example in Sonnet 6, *The Kiss*:

when all our life-breath met to fan
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity.

He would rather find a culmination in a world of nature perfected than in a realm of nature abandoned. Yeats added:

Men like him cannot be happy as we understand happiness, for to be happy one must delight like Nature in mere profusion, in mere abundance, in making and doing things, and if one sets an image of the perfect before one it must be the image that draws her perpetually, the image of a perfect fullness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise.²

¹ WB Yeats, 'The Happiest of the Poets', in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp.53-64 (p.53).

² Ibid, p.54. Yeats adds, 'Rossetti, drunken with natural beauty, saw the supernatural beauty, the impossible beauty, in his frenzy': p.64.

His late painting of *The Blessed Damozel*, 1875-8,¹ is a precise depiction of this Earthly Paradise regained as the ultimate destination of the lover. But his imagination is not prepared to venture beyond this point.

This is not to say that Rossetti's imagination was confined to the physical. As Yeats has pointed out, the expression of the physical was rather the vehicle by which the spiritual was realised, after which the body may be 'transfigured' into light, as in Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*, or lifted on 'the spirit's wing', as in Sonnet 21, *Love Sweetness*. In both *Bridal Birth* and Sonnet 48, *Death in Love*, love is unequivocally a form of death to the lower self. Nevertheless, Rossetti's characteristic position is to remain on earth gazing up towards the Beloved, the Blessed Damozel, aspiring to a transcendent union (or reunion). In whatever form it is depicted, Platonic Love is always the vehicle of transcendence in Rossetti, no less than it was for Dante. As such it is his only true form of religion.

In *Purgatory*, the souls notice Dante because, unlike them he casts a shadow; he has not abandoned his physical reality.² It is not a mind wandering alone in a visionary experience, but the entire man caught up in a total reality.³ Although it is at the same time a metaphor, a similarly human physicality is insisted on in stanza 8 of Rossetti's *Blessed Damozel*:

And still she bowed herself and stooped
Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm.

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 244, plate 355. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

² Canto XXVI.7-9.

³ William Anderson, *Dante the Maker* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.280, explains that Dante 'makes his journey to the ultimate vision of God more acceptable as a depiction of the union of the visible and the invisible sides of life, and closer to human experience than any earlier visionary journey'. William informs us that Rossetti's use of material reality was similar: 'That he cared very little for descriptive *poetry* is perfectly true ... [because] it exhibits and extols objects instead of turning them into the 'medium of exchange' between the material world and the soul': William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir*, 2 vols (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), I, 411. Referred to hereafter as '*Letters and Memoir*'. He also quotes (p.436) FW Myers, who noted the same: 'He is not a prophet, but an artist; yet an artist who, by the very intensity of his artistic vision, and by some inborn bent towards symbol and mysticism, stands on the side of those who see in material things a spiritual significance, and utters words of universal meaning from the fullness of his own heart'.

Both Dante and Rossetti demonstrate that the natural world and the supernatural world co-exist, and that the dividing line is often impossible to determine. In the mediaeval world of Dante, that state which we in our rational age define as 'real', was constantly intersected by the invisible worlds of religion and magic. The poetry of Rossetti, written some six hundred and fifty years after that of Dante, still retained some of the same essential characteristics and devices as that of the great poet after whom he had been named. Rossetti's *House of Life* records his own inner experience of the soul's progress towards a 'New Life'.

The Platonic 'House of Life'.

The central theme of Rossetti's poetry, like Dante's, is the transforming and redeeming quality of love. Plato informs the work of both poets. Ficino wrote:

Dante Alighieri...although he discoursed not in the Greek tongue with Plato, that sacred father of the Philosophers, did none the less in spirit hold converse with him, since he adorned his books with many Platonic sayings. Three kingdoms do we find described by our most trusty guide, Plato; one being of the blessed, one of the damned, and one of the pilgrim spirits. Virgil first followed this Platonic order; which Dante did also follow, drinking of the Platonic springs from Virgil's cup.¹

The Platonic vein of Dante's thought in the *Vita Nuova* is reflected in Rossetti's *House of Life*. Rossetti would have been familiar with Platonic concepts from Gabriele's writings, especially the five volume work entitled *Il Mistero dell' Amor Platonico nel Medio Evo* (*The Mysterious Platonic Love of the Middle Ages*), printed in 1840.

Robb writes; 'The visible world is a shadow, but a shadow of the truth, or in a favourite simile [of the Renaissance Neoplatonists], a house built in a material medium

¹ Preface to Ficino's translation of the *Monarchia*, quoted in Nesca A Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), p.175.

after the pattern already existing in the mind of the architect.’¹ The architect of this house, is of course God. Ficino expresses the idea thus: ‘Now God, the supreme architect, by the laws of His secret wisdom, created this earthly habitation of divinity, this most august temple that we behold.’² This is the temple of God, or temple of life, expressed as Nature. The Platonists and Neoplatonists believed that the world itself was a living organism with a soul: Ficino wrote, ‘If therefore in the one living body of the world there is everywhere a single life, as we have elsewhere declared, much more is there a single good which is present everywhere, even beyond the world.’³

In this sense, it is the material world of Nature, ‘this earthly habitation of divinity’, that is *The House of Life*. But, just as the world is an external materialisation of the mind of God, the external world acts as a symbolic reflection of the soul of man. The soul of man, according to Plato, is eternal, existing both before and after the birth and death of the mortal body of the individual, and so it is the corporeal body of man that may be seen as ‘the House of Life’. William Drummond wrote:

That at the time when first our souls are fram’d,
Ere in these mansions blind they come to dwell,
They live bright rays of that eternal light.⁴

We also find the phrase ‘the House of Life’ in Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*, when he wrote: ‘We term sleep a death, and yet it is waking that kills us and destroys those spirits that are the house of life’.⁵ Blake represented this concept as donning the garment of materiality, when he wrote in *The Gates of Paradise*: ‘Truly my Satan thou art but a Dunce / And dost not know the garment from the Man’.⁶ Pater, writing of Rossetti’s *House of Life*, places it in the same context from which Blake also drew: ‘the body, according to Swedenborg, is but the raiment of the soul - under that image, the whole of Rossetti’s work might count as a *House of Life*, of which he is but the

¹ Robb, p.66.

² Ibid, p.88.

³ Ibid, p.86.

⁴ Quoted by John Vyvyan, *Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p.46.

⁵ Quoted by Rees, *The Poetry of DGR*, p.134, n.1.

⁶ William Blake, *Poems and Prophecies* ([n.p.]: Everyman’s Library, 1991), p.311.

“Interpreter.” And it is a “haunted” house.’¹ The human body is no less ‘this earthly habitation of divinity’ than is Nature as a whole, both of which are reflections of the divine prototypes as they exist within the mind of God. That this is only dimly perceived by the mind of man forms the basis of Sonnet 34, *The Dark Glass*, in which Rossetti depicts corporeal life in terms of a building whose windows and doors bar the individual from the eternal truth which exists beyond birth and death.

If we define the living corporeal body of man as being ‘the House of Life’, in the sense that it contains the divine spark of the soul which is life itself, then it is also true that the body lives within the everyday world around us, which, as we have seen from the words of Ficino, is itself ‘one living body’, that is, the great body of Nature. God is the divine artist and poet, and Nature is his great work of artistic creation. In the nineteenth century Ruskin revived the same notion. But Nature for Rossetti was not so much an observable truth so much as a symbol of the greater underlying Truth, as it was also for the Neoplatonists. Man is the ‘House of Life’ of the soul, and Nature is the ‘House of Life’ of the world soul, that is, of every living thing, including man.

The Romantics revived the idea that the external forces of Nature could be employed as a symbolic motif to express the inner psychological state of the artist, such as the storm in stanza six of *The Portrait*, for instance. The Rossettian motif of the mirror expresses both the relationship between man and Nature, and between man and his inner nature. The symbolic glass of his soul reflects the nature within himself as the counterpart of that without. This link between man and Nature informs the work of the Neoplatonists, the Rosicrucians, the Romantics, and Rossetti. Through Love (awoken by Platonic Beauty, of which the Beloved was the highest natural example), Nature is ‘transfigured’, from the everyday to the sublime, from object to symbol. Dante’s insistence on associating Beatrice, the Beloved, with the number nine denoted her as the summation of all the myriad beauties to be found within Nature: she is not ten, who is the Godhead alone, the divine intellect, *nous*, but the completeness of all that exists apart from and below God. Symbolic Nature thus forms an integral part of both Rossetti’s painting and poetry.

Natural beauty suggests that of the Beloved; that of the Beloved suggests that of God; and if the hand of God is that of the divine artist, then this art is an expression of

¹ Walter Pater, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, in *Appreciations*, pp.228-242 (p.238).

the ultimate aesthetic. Rossetti's painting, especially that of the later period, after 1862, when the attempt to capture the face of the Beloved dominates his art, expresses his own pursuit of this elusive ideal.

In his poetry a very close connection can be observed between the sonnets of *The House of Life*, and Lorenzo de Medici's *Selve d'Amore*. The latter details the progress of the poet's love for his lady, through search, happiness, separation, and subsequent loss of that love. This is used as a vehicle for an exploration of the poet's psyche in his quest for Ideal Beauty. In its use of natural details and its examination of the various effects of Beauty on the emotions, as well as in the style in which it is written, it has much in common with Rossetti's verse.

Another Neoplatonic poet with whom there exists a close affinity is Michelangelo. Rossetti was an admirer of the verse of Michelangelo, and it was his intention to translate Michelangelo's work.¹ Rossetti no doubt felt a close empathy for the great poet-painter whose verse contained so much of an allegorical and symbolic nature. He would no doubt have delighted in the sonnets *On Dante Alighieri*. He was no doubt also drawn by those poems in which Michelangelo expressed his doubts, torments, and mental anguish, so similar to Rossetti's own in 1873, when he read William's copy of the poems. He must have seen himself mirrored in many of them.

There is another important connection between Rossetti and Michelangelo, and that is the insistence of both on the importance of man as expressed through the vehicle of the human body. In the work of Michelangelo, the whole of nature finds its summation in the figure of man. Man is absolute in his reflection of the divinity. Vitruvian Man, as drawn by Leonardo, is a microcosmic symbol of the universe. Bruno's 'heroic enthusiast' is termed 'a little earth'.² William wrote of his brother: 'For him the Human Being was always the Lord of Creation - the recipient and transformer and transmitter of the natural influences.'³ This, he adds, is the reason why his brother had so little interest in descriptive poetry. The same is true of Rossetti's painting; he concentrates on the human figure, and its predicament to the exclusion of all else. He could not paint landscapes, and the trouble he had with the descriptive passages of *Found* are legendary.

¹ WMR, *Designer and Writer*, p.163.

² Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts (Gli Eroici Furori)*, trans. by L. Williams, 2 vols (London: George Redway, 1887-89), I, 122-3: 'Here the subject matter signified by "earth" is the substance of the enthusiast'.

³ WMR, *Letters and Memoir*, p.411.

For Rossetti, as for Michelangelo, the figure was all, and all the better if it was a pretty one. In the later paintings, in which the face becomes the focus, this tendency becomes more exaggerated. But these paintings are not portraits. The danger of this approach is that for those persons who do not recognise this theory of Beauty, the picture remains simply that of a pretty girl. This has often been a criticism levelled at Rossetti's art. The Neoplatonists would have recognised that the beauty depicted transcended the model who is but a temporary vehicle. While the model is subject to time, a persistent motif for Rossetti, Beauty is not; it is eternal and resides in the model for a season only. Rossetti's devotion to the Neoplatonic Ideal of Beauty is the fundamental basis of his entire output. He is the 'allotted bondman' of

that Lady Beauty, in whose praise
Thy voice and hand shake still, - long known to thee
By flying hair and fluttering hem, - the beat
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,
How passionately and irretrievably,
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!

(Sonnet 77, *Soul's Beauty*.)

Edgar Wind makes the following observation:

Mystical Platonism thus fulfilled the prerequisite of any philosophy fashionable in its day: it combined the obscure with the familiar. But to secure this junction, a magic word is always needed, a felicitous phrase sufficiently compact to be quickly grasped and easily repeated, and at the same time sufficiently wide and mysterious to suggest a comprehensive philosophy of life.¹

I suggest that this is precisely what Rossetti is aiming at with his title *The House of Life*. It is also the function of many of the sonnet titles within the sequence.

¹ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p.89.

The Rosicrucian 'House of Life'.

The title may also carry Rosicrucian associations. One of the central concerns of Rosicrucianism was the aim of freeing mankind from the constraints of any particular religious creed or political alliance (although it was itself originally firmly associated with the Protestant cause in Europe). Concepts of national self-determination and of the rights of man were a later manifestation of its ideal as expressed through the Masonic movement, ideals which also deeply influenced the Romantic movement in both art and literature. This idealism seems to have touched the youthful Preraphaelite Brothers, as I shall demonstrate later.

Rosicrucianism, inheriting much of its thought from Neoplatonism, re-established the concept of the human being as the repository of the divine spark of the soul. Alchemy lent to this the idea that the individual was a sealed vessel in which the transmutation of the soul took place. The much sought-after Temple of the Rosicrucians was not an external edifice, but an internal construction, 'a building of human nature, in which men are the stones and Christ the corner-stone'; 'A living stone is a *mason* who builds himself up into the wall as a part of the temple of Human nature'; 'This temple was the abstract of the doctrine of Christ, who was the Grand Master'.¹

One of the characteristics of Rosicrucianism is the central idea that God's truth is written in Nature, which is imprinted throughout with his signs. The other source of his hidden doctrines is the Scriptures, and in particular the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible whose authorship is attributed to Moses. This is of some importance, as Mosaic images recur within Rossetti's writings and achieve a special significance in Sonnet 79, *The Monochord*. The word 'transfigured' that Rossetti uses in connection with his 'Song', also has a strong Mosaic, and therefore Rosicrucian, significance. It was the purpose of the Rosicrucian to identify the hidden signs of God within both Nature and the Scriptures, in order that he may then receive, as it were, God's secrets directly from his lips. For the alchemist, the Mosaic story of the creation functioned as a metaphor for the Great Work of alchemy.

¹ De Quincey, 'Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origin of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons', in *Collected Writings*, ed. by David Masson, 14 vols (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889-90), XIII, 384-448 (pp.423-4).

Fludd's emphasis on the Holy Scriptures echoes the Hermetic and Paracelsian belief that the most important source for the study of nature is the opening chapters of Genesis. ... The Mosaic, or Fluddean, philosophy is based upon this mystical chemical account of the Creation.¹

Highly important throughout all this was the divine light, which represents the active agent responsible for the divine Creation. Light and divinity are terms which are constantly related in the Fluddean writings. Fundamentally, it was the light of the Lord informing the chaos which was requisite for the formation of the world, and it was this same divine light arising from the Spirit which on the fourth day was formed into the sun and received into the aetherial heaven. Fludd was as much a proponent of the primacy of the sun as any Renaissance neo-Platonist. He felt that its importance was apparent in the Scriptures, especially in Psalm 18:5, where it is written, 'God hath put his tabernacle in the Sun.' Fludd interpreted this to mean that the Spirit of the Lord is actually in the sun, and he supported this position by theological arguments, Cabalistic analyses, and references to arithmetic, geometry, and music. Above all, the perfection of the sun indicates its connection with divinity.²

The most important symbol of Rosicrucian thought is the Sun. Intimately connected is the concept of Sacred Fire, which permeates the universe. Ultimately both are the same thing, operating on three levels in different aspects: in its most pure form of light (which is also pure love) as an idea in the mind of God; in its celestial form as the sun, which bestows life; and in its coarse elemental form on earth, where it manifests itself as fire, where it radiates light and heat. This derives from Pico della Mirandola's *Heptaplus*, where he writes:

With us heat is an elemental quality, in the celestial regions it is a heat-diffusing power, in the angelic minds it is the idea of heat. Let me expound this somewhat

¹ Allen G Debus, *The Chemical Philosophy: Paracelsian Science and Medicine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 2 vols (New York: Science History Publications, 1977), I, 226.

² Ibid, pp.229-30. 'Referring to Psalm 18.5 and the relationship of the sun and the Holy Spirit, Fludd concluded that in man the godly tabernacle is in the heart': p.235.

more clearly. There is among us a fire which is an element. The sun is a fire in heaven, the seraphic intellect is a fire in the supernal region. But behold how they differ. The elemental burns, the celestial gives life, the super-celestial loves.¹

In the words that conclude Dante's pilgrimage, this is 'The love that moves the sun and other stars.'

Paracelsus, whose work had a profound influence upon Rosicrucian philosophy, extends this idea of sacred fire further:

Since fire cannot burn without the presence of air, one may say of the element of fire that it is of itself nothing other than a *body to the soul* or perhaps *a house in which the soul of man lives*. Therefore fire is the true man about which our whole philosophy is concerned. And if I have now said that no fire can burn without air, I will go on to say that this should be understood correctly - that one should understand under this burning always life. So if I should say by way of an example that something cannot burn, then I also mean that it cannot live.²

For Paracelsus, 'the House of Life', 'in which the soul of man lives', is composed of this sacred fire itself. Debus states that 'The Paracelsians seem to have agreed that the font of life was the heavenly spirit, which was found in the sun. Surely no life could survive without the rays of sunlight.'³

Both Rosicrucian sun-symbolism and fire-symbolism are to be found in the poetry of Swinburne and Rossetti, and also in the paintings of the latter. In Sonnet 61, *The Song Throe*, 'The Song-god - He the Sun-god' are identified as being one and the same. In Sonnet 70, *The Hill Summit*, Rossetti describes himself as 'a belated worshipper'.

As Fludd illustrated, the godly tabernacle in the sun is mirrored in man by the godly tabernacle in the heart; the celestial sun is mirrored by the spiritual sun within. The work of William Blake closely follows these symbolic ideas: Blake's fire, the fire of the

¹ Robb, p.86.

² Paracelsus, in *Liber Azoth*, 1591 quoted by Debus, I, 87. My italics.

³ Debus, I, 88.

Imagination, and therefore life, is but a re-invention of Neoplatonic and Rosicrucian sacred fire.

One of the major components of the Rosicrucian system was the Cabala. I include an illustration from a Cabalistic text, Tobias Cohn's *Ma'aseh Tobiiyyah*, 1721, which depicts the human body in the form of a house (Fig. 1).

Shelley's gothic novel *St. Irvyne: Or the Rosicrucian* was almost certainly known to Rossetti, although this early work pictures the Rosicrucian as little more than a black magician. In another Rosicrucian novel, Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni*, published during Rossetti's youth, the specific term 'the House of Life' is found.¹ In Rossetti's lifetime we come across another example of the Rosicrucian 'House of Life' in a work by Hargrave Jennings, entitled *Curious Things of the Outside World*, published in 1861. Jennings claimed, 'We believe we are also correct in stating that, in our second volume, we shall be the first, and only, modern exponents of Rosicrucianism.'² In this eccentric work, (it was later rewritten and expanded under the title *The Rosicrucians: Their Rites and Mysteries*³), there occur several examples of 'the House of Life', which are of interest to us, as they pre-date Rossetti's title. Reference is made to the Platonic idea that the body is the 'earthly tenement' of the soul.⁴ He discusses the importance of the spiritual house to come: 'the character of this other house, as it is to be so much more a lasting one, is of infinitely more consequence than the house in which man at present is'.⁵ He adds that mankind, 'being so satisfied as they are with their present domicile and fearful of change, ... [desires] that their present habitation should be their whole, last, and only house.'⁶

¹ Bulwer Lytton, *Zanoni* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1877), p.79: 'If I were to predict your fortune by the vain calculations of the astrologer, I should tell you, in their despicable jargon, that my planet sat darkly in your house of life.' On p. 378, reference is made to 'the temple of the clay'. On p. 361, the basis of Platonism is noted: 'in the mysteries of the nobler Platonism, which hints at the secrets of all the starry brotherhoods, from the Chaldean to the later Rosicrucian'. Another novel by Lytton, *The Coming Race* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1871), although making no direct reference to Rosicrucianism, is an almost perfect example of the Rosicrucian vision of a Utopian society, in the same vein as Bacon's posthumous *New Atlantis*.

² Hargrave Jennings, *Curious things of the Outside World*, 2 vols (London: T and W Boone, 1861), I, 15.

³ Hargrave Jennings, *The Rosicrucians: Their rites and Mysteries*, 2 vols (London: John C Nimmo, 1887).

⁴ *Curious Things*, I, 45.

⁵ *Ibid*, II, 55.

⁶ *Ibid*, II, 56.

Man must not pull his house to pieces, in order that he may live in it! In order that he may have the roof of his human-nature over him. His windows must be closed, and he must sit with his single small candle (since, to be at all, he must live in his own light). He must be closed-up, and live, alone, in his own house of senses, to make him that which God intended he should be in this world. As man must be in 'a state', he must not realise any other state. ... He must be like a man moving in his house, with closed windows, by candle-light, we repeat, while the unsuspected great radiance of the sun is shining without. His self-contained, candle-lighted darkness must be maintained, to make him man. For to throw open his windows, and let in the noonday sunshine, would be to kill the candle. And human intelligence, and God's knowledge, cannot coexist. For one destroys the other. The candle is put out by the sun.

Great nature's secrets are at the safest in being disbelieved. They are so intended. Impossibility makes the world.¹

This brings to mind a similar thought expressed by Rossetti in Sonnet 34, *The Dark Glass*:

Shall birth and death, and all dark names that be
As doors and windows bared to some loud sea,
Lash deaf mine ears and blind my face with spray;
And shall my sense pierce love, - the last relay
And ultimate outpost of eternity?

The picture here is of man imprisoned within the 'house of life'. It is interesting to compare Rossetti's internal image of life as 'some loud sea' which deafens and blinds him to the eternal truth with Jennings' image of 'the unsuspected great radiance of the sun .. shining without.' Jennings' image is reminiscent of Plato's famous metaphor of the dwellers in the dark cave.

Jennings' image of the dark 'House of Life' lit only by man's inner candle illustrates the importance within Rosicrucian thinking of all forms of light. Light is sacred, but

¹ Ibid, II, 91-2.

there are different forms of light. The symbol of the lamp is recurrent in Rosicrucian literature; it will be remembered that the tomb of Christian Rosencreutz was lit with an ever-burning lamp: 'Although the sun never shined in this vault, nevertheless it was enlightened with another sun'.¹ Jennings also relates the apocryphal tale of a tomb lit by a similar lamp found in the English Midlands. An example of this, quite typical of Rosicrucian imagery, is found in Sonnet 35, *The Lamp's Shrine*. Another example is Sonnet 88, *Hero's Lamp*, which places the theme within a classical context.

Interestingly, Jennings was familiar with the writings of Gabriele Rossetti:

Signor Rossetti, who possesses a very intimate acquaintance with the history of the Hospitallers, maintains stoutly that there is much in common between the doctrines taught in the higher grades of the Freemasons - more, also, that has been lost - and the views, *formula*, and fashions of the Order of the Temple.²

Besides Plato, much of Rosicrucian thought was based on the putative writings of Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian Hermes, and an interesting reference is to be found in *Brewer's*, which lists under the heading 'Houses of Life': 'In ancient Egypt, centres of priestly learning attached to the large temples where scribes copied religious texts'.³

Another source of the title, one which also has possible Rosicrucian connections, is Browning's *Transcendentalism: a Poem in Twelve Books*.⁴ This poem contains references to the Christian mystic Jacob Boehme, who, writing around the same time that the original Rosicrucian manifestos were circulated, was often, though erroneously, associated with the movement. In this poem, Browning asks: 'May a brother speak?',

¹ From *Fama Fraternitatis*, the first Rosicrucian manifesto, given in full in Frances A Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp.238-251 (p.246).

² *Curious Things*, II, 277.

³ *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, rev. by Ivor H Evans, 14th edn (London: Cassell, 1989), p.567. The term 'house of life' also appears in the preceding entry, 'Houses, Astrological'.

⁴ The 'Great Work' of alchemy is often described as being accomplished in twelve stages, each of which is characterised by an astrological sign. It thus takes a symbolic 'year' to complete. The four major stages, noted by the colours black, white, citrine (or sometimes green), and red, represent the 'seasons': John Read, *Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy: Its literature and Relationships* (London: G Bell and Sons, 1936), pp.136, 146, and 154. Alchemical treatises are sometimes composed of twelve books or sections, for instance, the *Twelve Keys* of Basil Valentine (Frankfurt, 1611), or the *Twelve Gates* of George Ripley. A work of the Rosicrucian apologist Michael Maier, entitled *Symbola Aureae Mensae Duodecim Nationum*, (Frankfurt, 1617), celebrates the contributions of 'twelve chosen Heroes' to the Hermetic philosophy, 'explained and set forth in 12 books, illustrated with copper plates': *ibid*, p.222. This alchemical tendency provides a possible link with Browning's title.

and then attacks the dry, wordy, and ponderous philosophising of Boehme and his ilk which wastes so much of life's precious time.¹ The the mystic Rose is portrayed as a vital, overwhelming life-force that displays scant regard or respect for such aridity:

And in there breaks the sudden rose herself, (40)
Over us, under, round us every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all, -
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.²

This chapter on the title of Rossetti's sequence has suggested that the simple, but evocative and elusive phrase 'the House of Life' gains its resonance only when placed within an odd and eclectic set of traditions ranging from astrology to Neoplatonism and Rosicrucianism. In this, it provides a proper introduction to the poems within 'the House'. Likewise, we may expect the title of each sonnet to contain a significance of its own.

¹ Browning refers in this poem to Boehme's vision of transfigured Nature (lines 22-7), but comments that 'While reading prose in that tough book he wrote We shut the clasps and find life's summer past': lines 30 and 33. Is the answer 'Another Boehme with a tougher book / And subtler meanings of what roses say ...?': lines 35-6.

² Robert Browning, *The Poems*, ed. by John Pettigrew, 2 vols (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), I, 736.

CHAPTER 2

THE OPENING SONNETS OF *THE HOUSE OF LIFE*.

Rossetti indicates in the introductory poem of *The House of Life, The Sonnet*, that he attributed a special value to the verse form itself. The beauty of the sonnet allowed Rossetti to achieve the 'arduous fullness' with which he proudly loads his verse, often to its detriment. William Sharp recognised this problem with Rossetti's poetry:

the poet's absorption in his conception is so great that he forgets the reader's possible incapacity to keep mental pace with him without warning; and though the lines are not obscure, they are so worded that a vague uncertainty akin to the effect produced by obscurity is apt to be the result.¹

Fredeman suggests another reason for this density:

the most difficult aspect of Rossetti's poetry - and that quality which makes it so unmemorable, or at least unmemorable - its ellipticity, was also a conscious strategy employed to distance himself from his poetry.²

Doughty endorses Fredeman's view:

That Rossetti, so averse to any public revelation of an artist's private life, should, especially in the circumstances in which he now apparently found himself [his newly established, or re-established, relationship with Jane Morris], fear any public revelation of his own, was inevitable. Thus, his almost paradoxical aim was to reveal yet conceal the most personally significant because most deeply

¹ William Sharp, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study* (London: Macmillan, 1882), p.423. Sharp notes 'the over-elaboration into which Rossetti's intensely artistic temperament sometimes betrayed him ... a style that is too laboured to be really artistic, too artificially artistic to be poetry': p.418.

² 'Introduction', *VP*, 20 (Special Rossetti Issue, nos. 3&4), p.xxviii.

emotional phases of his experience. To do this, he pretended that the life presented was impersonal, 'representative', and as we have seen, disavowed 'personality' in the sonnets, besides attempting to conceal the dates of their composition and the experiences which were their inspiration. At one time, so William declared, his brother had meant 'to write and publish some sort of exposition of *The House of Life*,' an intention which, like so many of Rossetti's but in this case with better reason, was never carried out.¹

Sonnet 60, *Transfigured Life*, might well have served as a better introduction to *The House of Life*, as it is in this sonnet that Rossetti outlines the process by which he converts life lived into art. Rossetti wrote that *The House of Life* was intended to portray 'life representative, as associated with love and death, with aspiration and foreboding, or with ideal art and beauty.'²

Another important reason why the sonnet was so prized by Rossetti, was its employment by Dante and the early Italian poets, whom Rossetti was trying to emulate. But the mediaeval and Renaissance love-poem, which is an expression of the ideals of Courtly Love, is transformed in *The House of Life*, where it is used to express those principles 'underlying and organising the experience of the modern man.'³

It is of some interest to note that the sonnet resumed its prominence during those periods in which the Hermetic philosophy also flourished, namely the Renaissance and the Victorian. There was, however, a considerable difference between the Elizabethan sonnet and that of the Victorian age. The Elizabethan sonnet was constructed within a sophisticated set of conventions and formulae, which was employed to disguise raw emotion, so that it would be communicated only indirectly. Although Rossetti could be said to be doing exactly this through the 'transfigured life' of his verse, he himself had no patience for many Elizabethan devices, complaining about the 'provoking conceits' of Donne, an author he nonetheless admired. Although Rossetti's professed aim was a Preraphaelite 'naturalness', the conventions he used tended instead towards the Elizabethan trait of 'fantastic phrase, and far-fetched imagery'.⁴ *The House of Life*

¹ Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.382.

² Joan Rees, *The Poetry of DGR*, p.162, n.1.

³ Ibid, p.163.

⁴ Ibid, p.143. Sharp notes, in *DGR*, p.420: '*Beauty's Pageant* recalls a style of sonnet-writing germane to that of the Elizabethan age with its delight in intricate and laboured imagery and quaint

owes a great debt to the sonnets of Shakespeare in their sequential examination of the poets most intimate emotional responses. As in the verse of Michelangelo, the sonnet form is used to offer the reader a condensed and often allegorical meditation on the poets inner state, and it is to this that the form is so well suited. Rossetti's term 'autopsychology' is an appropriate description of the work of Dante, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Rossetti himself. The ambition of all four poets might be summed up in the last line from Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* I:

'Foole', said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write.'¹

Rossetti frequently refers to his poetry as 'Song', as if the word sonnet suggested to him a small song, or 'song-et'. Although this is a false etymology, the word does have musical associations, as Watts-Dunton informs us;

The fact of the word sonnet being connected with *suonare*, to play upon an instrument, shows that the knowledge of music, though perhaps not essential, is of great value to the sonnet writer. Indeed, owing to the consonantal character of our language a knowledge of music is really of more importance to the English than to the Italian sonnet writer.²

This helps to associate Rossetti's love of the form with the many occurrences of music in both Rossetti's painting and poetry. The influences of poetry and music pervade both mediums of Rossetti's art. The idea that music and colour are two manifestations of a single vibration derives from Rosicrucian thought as explained in the writings of Hargrave Jennings. Similarly, for Rossetti music and colour are alternative means of expressing the same underlying concept. Rossetti's habit of writing poems for pictures, both his own and other painters, indicates how he felt of the two arts as composing a mutually linked dyad.

affection'. He adds: 'in *The Sun's Shame* (I) we have one of the most marked examples of the direct influence of Shakespeare's sonnets upon the author of *The House of Life*. ... [Rossetti's] metaphor is too laboured, has too much of Elizabethan affectation, to read so naturally': pp.429-30.

¹ Rees, p.146.

² Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Poetry and the Renascence of Wonder* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916), p.176.

Rossetti may have been attracted to the sonnet in part because it is characterised by a similar duality. The sonnet, symbolically divided between octave and sestet, like the Platonic soul, is a 'divided self', composed of male and female components, each complementing the other. One part is solar, and the other, lunar. Thus the sestet, being lunar, is a reflection of the light shed by the solar octave. Seen in this way, the sonnet becomes not only a philosophical vehicle in itself, but it also carries alchemical connotations of the 'sacred marriage'.

The sonnet is a microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic whole in *The House of Life*. Just as the sonnet is divided in two, so is the work as a whole, with its twin components of *Youth and Change* and *Change and Fate*. It will be observed that the ratio of the parts is remarkably similar in both: octave to sestet, 8 to 6, that is, 1.33 to 1; sonnets in *Youth and Change* to sonnets in *Change and Fate*, 59 to 42, that is, 1.4 to 1. However, the ratio of the two parts of the sonnet is best expressed by the irreducible whole numbers 4 to 3, which are the numbers of matter and spirit, body and soul, respectively. The duality of the sonnet is again expressed in the sum of these numbers: 7×2 . From these numbers, a sequence can be formed; unity of the whole (1), duality (2), trinity (3), and quaternity (4). The sonnet can now be seen to conform to the Pythagorean Tetractys which forms the basis of the Platonic four levels of existence; $1+2+3+4=10$, the sum of the universe. All the possibilities of existence are contained in this, as it is the combination of multiplicity and unity. It is the number of the universe expressed as a circle, formed by the sum of the number 9 of the material circumference and the unity of God at the centre.¹ In the *Vita Nuova*, Love says to Dante, 'I am as the centre of a circle, to the which all parts of the circumference bear an equal relation: but with thee it is not thus.'² Here, Beatrice, as the number 9, is the expression of Nature, and Love is the central unity which motivates the universe, 'The love that moves the sun and other stars.' Thus the sonnet embraces and contains a complex numerological significance, and is in itself a symbol of mystical universal completeness.

Samuel Waddington wrote that the sonnet-form was:

¹ The number 9 is the number of the circumference because it is the sum of the number of degrees, 360, that compose a circle.

² *Works*, II, 42.

a tablet on which to inscribe the divine “pensees”, the momentary flashes of light, clear vision and deeper insight into the sacred mysteries of the infinite world around him, that visit unbidden the inspired mind of the poet and prophet.¹

That the form itself embodied a certain significance is suggested by Theodore Watts-Dunton’s sonnet entitled *The Sonnet’s Voice (a metrical lesson by the sea shore)*, in which he compared the nineteenth century Petrarchan sonnet to the image of a wave.² The sea is an important and commonly used symbol within the work of Rossetti, and Rossetti seems to have accepted Watts-Dunton’s association between the sea and the sonnet. Rees writes:

Hall Caine described the effect as a flow and ebb of thought but perhaps it might be better described as a flow of feeling and an ebb of thought. Part one and part two [of *The House of Life*] then stand in relation to each other as the two parts of individual sonnets do: part one representing the flow of feeling in the emotional life during youth and middle-age and part two, with its commentary on life and art and its annotation of part one, representing the ebb which follows as comment and reflection replace the urgent responses to love which part one records.³

The Introduction to *The House of Life: The Sonnet*.

The Sonnet itself appears in all collections of Rossetti’s verse in an incomplete state.

Originally it was produced in the form of a decorated poem, somewhat reminiscent of Blake’s poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, though in monotone. The design

¹ Rees, p.142.

² Watts-Dunton’s sonnet is reproduced by William Sharp, *DGR*, p.392. In light of Swinburne’s use of the sea as metaphor (as in *The Return*), and Watts-Dunton’s own use of this symbol at the start of *Aylwin*, the concept of the sonnet as wave appears to have profound implications. Rees notes that this image was taken up by Hall Caine in *Sonnets of Three Centuries* and William Sharp in *Sonnets of this Century*. Both were friends of Rossetti. Rees adds (p.164, n.1 cont. from previous page); ‘Theodore Watts says, in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on the sonnet, that Rossetti accepted the “wave theory”.’

³ *Ibid*, pp.163-4.

was produced to accompany a book of verse, Main's *Treasury of English Sonnets*, presented to Rossetti's mother on the occasion of her eightieth birthday in 1880. Christina helped Rossetti in discussions over alternative endings to the sonnet. In its illustrated form, *The Sonnet* would have provided a fitting introduction to *The House of Life*, by providing a decorative frontispiece, and thereby distinguishing it from the succeeding sonnets.

In the seldom-seen illustrated version of *The Sonnet*,¹ (Fig.2), a winged and laurel-crowned angel adorns the top of the drawing. In her right hand she carries a fourteen stringed lyre, and in her left hand she holds a winged hour-glass. She is the poet's muse, his soul, and is labelled 'Anima', which reminds us of the early prose tale *Hand and Soul*. Growing up from the bottom right-hand corner of the drawing is a rose bush, which arches up behind the angel and trails down the left hand border, thus enclosing the text. The hour-glass held by the angel appears to be in the heart of the rose bush. A grassy border defines the bottom of the drawing, and inscribed in reverse lettering is the legend, 'DG Rossetti pro Matre fecit Apr:27.1880.' The first words of both the octave and the sestet, 'A Sonnet', are blocked out in reverse lettering (white on black), and coupled to that of the sestet is the image of the coin, which is its allegorical subject. Both sides of the coin are shown. On the left hand side appears an emblem of a butterfly, symbol of the soul, and on the right hand is displayed an ouroboros, in whose loop is the sign Alpha-Omega, both of which are symbols of eternity.² More precisely they are indications that eternity is composed of cyclical Change, which is one of the primal subjects of *The House of Life*. The hour-glass again implies this state of constant flux, but more than this, its two components symbolise the function of the sonnet, the

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 258.

² It is of interest to note that the ouroboros on Rossetti's 'coin' motif replicates that on the personal medal of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, illustrated in plate 45 of EH Gombrich's *Symbolic Images*. Lorenzo was a pupil of Ficino and the patron of Botticelli's allegorical paintings. Gombrich writes in 'Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of His Circle', *ibid*, p.66, that the ouroboros 'is a hieroglyph, described by Iamblichus as signifying 'eternity', and the aura of esoteric wisdom which surrounds it may have proclaimed to his contemporaries a preoccupation with mystic lore. Ficino had translated Iamblichus and discussed the sacred symbol in his writings and we should like to think that it was he who advised Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco on its adoption for the medal. ... This medal, therefore, may be a token of that collaboration between Ficino and Botticelli for their patron ... for which we are trying to make a case.' Rossetti's use of this symbol implies cyclical time, which is both beginning and end, an idea which he may have derived from both Swedenborg and Blake. The Christian view of time is strictly linear, from beginning to end. The ouroboros is also composed of both sexes and is self-perpetuating: the tail represents the phallus, and the mouth, 'the swallower', the female organ, which both gives and takes life.

first part flowing into the second.¹ That the hour glass appears in the centre of the rose bush, and the rose surrounds the sonnet shows that, for Rossetti, the sonnet is the distinctive vehicle for the expression of love, or of the soul moved and changed by love.

The Sonnet is not one of Rossetti's more accessible poems.² Throughout, it echoes the tension that is present within the form of the sonnet, the stress of its component duality. This poem is an illustration of the essential counterpoise inherent in the sonnet; although Rossetti chose to illustrate this with the image of the hour-glass, he may equally well have chosen the image of a pair of scales, each idea dependent upon the other, each argument weighed against its counterpart. *The Sonnet* is not only an exercise in the concept of duality, it is also an exploration of the essential paradox present within this duality. Finally, we are brought to see how duality is not only present within, but also resolved by the concept of trinity.

The first line presents us immediately with this paradox:- 'A Sonnet is a moment's monument'. Here we are given the image of two contradictory entities, the 'moment', and its 'monument'. The first is abstract and ephemeral; the second is concrete and permanent. Yet, at the same time, the second word qualifies the first; 'moment' is also something of importance, that upon which something turns. The paradox is developed in lines two and three, where the monument is stated to be a memorial 'To one dead deathless hour', in a contradiction designed to reveal the illusory nature of the existence within which man is confined. This is the essential paradox of the human condition; the extrusion of the eternal infinite from the material finite, of soul from body. But in this case it is an inversion, as the 'monument' (that which is material and finite), is seen to be acting as a 'memorial' to that, which although unseen, is eternal and infinite. The sonnet composes this 'monument' to the 'moment' of the soul, yet like music, it has the ability to capture a fragment of the infinite.

Rossetti goes on to suggest apparently alternative supernatural associations which may be present in the duality of the sonnet; 'Whether for lustral rite or dire portent'. This is immediately compounded by the phrase; 'Look that it be....Of its own arduous

¹ This, like the ouroboros, may be interpreted as the male flowing into the female.

² Sharp states that Rossetti's poetic conception 'occasionally was expressed so overweighted with symbolism that its significance is by no means clearly cartooned for the reader - so uttered that its application is not at first easily apprehended': *DGR*, p.411. He also writes: 'I confess I see in it no special merit as a sonnet, still less as a sonnet on the sonnet; indeed, on the other hand, it seems to me to have an obscurity equalling the most obscure passages Rossetti has composed': p.414.

fullness reverent'. In this 'arduous fullness', Rossetti is proclaiming the difficulty he deliberately places in his work, and the purposes this may serve; that some degree of reverence is demanded by these characteristic supernatural implications (or invocations). Rossetti was proud of his 'arduous fullness': 'One benefit I do derive...as a result of my method of composition. My work becomes condensed. Probably the man does not live who could write what I have written more briefly than I have done.'¹ James Skelton adds; 'His poems display the highest concentration of the poetic faculty. They are terse as epigrams. ... The fire of his imagination is a spiritual flame which consumes whatever is not essential.'² It is a system of the same desire Doughty attributed to the autobiographical content of his work; 'his almost paradoxical aim was to reveal yet conceal'. This was, in Rossetti's words, the 'condensed and hinted order so dear to imaginative minds',³ that Rossetti believed was necessary for the composition of great works of literature.

The difficulty produced by 'arduous fullness' climaxes in the last three lines of the octave of this sonnet, in what must be one of the most impenetrable passages in all of Rossetti's verse;

Carve it in ivory or in ebony,
As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.

Lines six and seven again suggest the essential duality that we have been examining; the 'monument' that is the sonnet, whether expressing good or bad (line four), light or dark, day or night, is itself composed of opposing though complementary units. This duality is stressed in Rossetti's illustration in which the words 'The Sonnet' are picked out in reverse, thus emphasising the concept of light and darkness as an important theme. The ideas contained in the dualities of darkness and light, Day and Night, bring to mind certain passages in the Rosicrucian writings of Hargrave Jennings:

¹ WMR, *Letters and Memoir*, I, 416.

² Ibid, p.438-9.

³ Ibid, p.420.

light to us is darkness in the supernatural; and that which is light to the supernatural is darkness to us: matter being darkness, and soul light.¹

Natural and supernatural, though one is only the reversed side of the other, as 'darkness is only the reversed side of light, and light is only the reversed side of darkness'.²

The references to 'reversed side', in particular, recalls the imagery of the coin in the sestet of this sonnet.³

But what are we to make of the last image of the octave? William Sharp describes the last line of the octave as 'absolutely meaningless'.⁴ The 'monument' of the sonnet becomes in these lines a monolith, carved in 'ivory or ebony'. The sonnet, we may imagine inscribed upon this monolith, which stands stark and solid against the sky. We must imagine time passing in an alternating succession of night and day. Out of the East - the Orient - rises the orb of the full moon, until it stands poised above the monolith, thus appearing as its crest, even if fleetingly. The moon is the pearl of the heavens, the Queen of the Sky, that influence which rules the sea, and creates the wave that Watts-Dunton compares to the sonnet. The lunar pearl is also a symbolic flower, and so *The House of Life* opens with the same image on which it will close. In the intermediary sequence the poet attempts to examine the celestial flower as it is reflected in his own heart and soul, for the answers to all the eternal questions that comprise the human condition. The answer to these questions is his 'One Hope'. The 'monument' of the sonnet is dedicated to the moon, and in the same way that the part reflects the whole, so is the entire *House of Life*.

To obtain the pearl, it must first be prised from the hard shell of resistant language in which it is contained. The pearl is not intended to be cast before swine; it is 'the pearl of

¹ *The Rosicrucians*, I, 102. The same passage is found in his earlier work, *Curious Things*, II, 152. Both books pre-date the writing of *The Sonnet*.

² *The Rosicrucians*, I, 268, quoting 'Comte de Gabalis'.

³ WFC Wigston, *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians* (London: George Redway, 1888), p.205, discusses a similar idea: 'For everything speaks a double language of art and revelation, of ideas and sense at once. Yet these separate two (sign and meaning) are one, until separated by thought - the sign only carries the idea, the idea gives birth to the sign, according to Plato. For that is the Divine Art. ... Thus in Objective Nature (and Art) there are two identical (seemingly) yet separate sides, one appealing to aesthetic, the other to rational faculties.'

⁴ William Sharp, *DGR*, p.414.

great price', the 'treasure difficult to obtain'. It is this which gives it great value, for it is the hidden knowledge of esoteric wisdom. Ficino, in *De amore*, writes that behind such forms, 'as behind a veil, divine mysteries are meant to be hidden':

For it was the custom of ancient theologians to protect their sacred and pure arcana by hedges of metaphor ... in order to prevent them from being defiled by the profane and impure.¹

Coventry Patmore, writing about Rossetti, makes the same point:

In much of his work there is a rich and obscure glow of insight into depths too profound and too sacred for clear speech, even if they could be spoken; a sort of insight not at all uncommon in the great art of past times, but exceedingly rare in the art of our time.²

In Rossetti's drawing, the block of text which constitutes *The Sonnet* is surrounded by the rose bush. Filling the space directly above the text is the angel of the poet's soul, his anima, and it is this which may be seen as the 'flowering crest'. The angel and the flowering rose appear as one. The roses around the sonnet are white and may be imagined as 'impearled'. The word 'orient' then may be understood to refer to the area of origin of the rose; it may be a Damascus rose, which reminds us of the pilgrimage of Christian Rosencreutz to that place in the first Rosicrucian manifesto. The Damascus rose was brought to England during the middle ages by the crusaders, since which time its hybrid has become the established English rose. The Syrian rose and the lunar Great Goddess are symbolically one and the same. They share the same origins and are embodied in the goddess Astarte.

The sestet is also concerned with the concept of duality. Where the octave depicts the sonnet as a monument existing against the assaults of time, the sestet imagines the sonnet as a coin: 'its face reveals / The soul, - its converse, to what power 'tis due'. In that only one side of a coin may be viewed at any one time, when the face, the soul, is

¹ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, p.140.

² WMR, *Letters and Memoir*, I, 436.

revealed, the power, or deity to which it is due, is hidden. This reminds us of the story of Christ, who, when questioned as to whom the godly should render allegiance in the form of taxes, replied;

Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.¹

Several of these notions converge in these lines from Milton's *Comus*:

Beauty is nature's coin, must not be hoarded, (739)
But must be current, and the good thereof
Consists in mutual and partaken bliss,
Unsavoury in the enjoyment of itself.
If you let slip time, like a neglected rose
It withers on the stalk with languished head.
Beauty is Nature's brag, and must be shown.²

In the sestet, Rossetti provides us with a trinity of Life, Love, and Death, three 'Powers' to which the sonnet may be due. Doughty refers to these as 'Gabriel's now almost obsessive trinity of *The House of Life*, life, love, and death. This trinity in his own soul, he declared, adored this mouth [of the Beloved] alone.'³ In the octave, and in the beginning of the sestet we are repeatedly presented with the concept of duality. Here, however, this duality is modified. Light and dark, Day and Night, Life and Death are reconciled through the mediation of a third element, Love. This is expressed in the titles of Sonnet 36, *Life-In -Love*, and Sonnet 48, *Death-In-Love*. Love (symbolised by the rose) is the 'flowering crest' that stands between the polarities of Life and Death. Just as in the octave we saw that the Rossettian sonnet was dedicated to the moon, here, in the sestet we are shown the three phases of the lunar trinity. The first of these is the

¹ Matthew 22.19-21.

² *The Poems of Milton*, ed. by Thomas Keightley, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), I, 113.

³ *Victorian Romantic*, p.391.

white phase of the lunar Maiden, which is Life. The second is the red phase of the passionate and fertile Mother, here characterised as Love. The third is the dark phase of the moon, which is not only Death, but also Renewal. This symbolism occurs repeatedly within Rossetti's art. It is expressed quite unambiguously in the lunar symbolism of *The Orchard Pit*:

At first she sang, 'Come to Love,' and of the sweetness of Love she said many things. And next she sang, 'Come to Life,' and Life was sweet in her song. But long before I reached her, she knew that all her will was mine: and then her voice rose softer than ever, and her words were, 'Come to Death,' and Death's name in her mouth was the very swoon of all sweetest things that be.¹

Just as *The House of Life* is devoted to an exploration of the effects of these lunar influences on the life of the poet, so his later painting, in particular, must also be seen as a glorification of the Goddess. This suggests an explanation for some of the more perplexing aspects in such sonnets as Sonnet 48, *Death in Love*, in which the last line reads 'I and this Love are one, and I am Death.' Death is seen here not so much as a finality, but rather as a gateway to a higher state, in which the soul emerges as if from a chrysalis, as in Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*, and Sonnet 41, *Through Death to Love*. Here, in *The Sonnet*, as it opens *The House of Life*, the poet prepares us for the journey through life as it is experienced under these lunar influences.

Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*.

It was with this sonnet that the 1870 version of *The House of Life* most appropriately opened, although in the final version this sonnet was displaced from its primal position by the altogether inferior *Love Enthroned*, in order to emphasise the centrality of Love in the sequence. Doughty suggests that the "House of Life" ... was essentially a "House of Love."²

¹ *Works*, I, 430.

² Loc.cit., p.389. William Sharp makes the same comment, *DGR*, pp.408-9, although he is keen to emphasise that the ideal lies beyond the sexual.

In *Love Enthroned*, Rossetti examines 'all kindred Powers the heart finds fair', that is, those various powers that govern man's desires and aspirations in life; Truth, Hope, Fame, Youth, and Life itself. Even in this first sonnet, Life is cyclically connected with Death, as the last line of the octave proclaims, 'And Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear.' This is the eternal ouroboros of Alpha and Omega that Rossetti placed on one face of the coin in his illustration of *The Sonnet*. But here, 'Love's throne was not with these; but far above / All passionate wind of welcome and farewell', that is, Life (as Birth) and Death, and all the superficial events that fill the experience of man in-between. Above Truth, Hope, Fame, Youth, Life, and Death, Love 'sat in breathless bowers they dream not of'. All those things that on earth are important to man are subservient to Love; though unaware of his true nature, they may serve Love's purpose. Love sits enthroned as the greatest of all powers, 'The love that moves the sun and other stars.' Whereas *The Sonnet* is dedicated to the moon, *Love Enthroned* is dedicated to her counterpart and consort, the sun of Love.

In this sonnet, we are first introduced to the deity Love. Throughout *The House of Life*, as in Dante's *Vita Nuova*, there is an inherent and quite purposeful ambiguity about this figure. It is essential at the outset to understand that there are three figures who may be referred to by this name or title. Firstly, there is the Great Lunar Goddess who goes under many names; Astarte, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, and Mary, etc. Plato refers to this deity as Uranian Aphrodite. Secondly, there is the lower counterpart of this deity, whom Plato refers to as Aphrodite Dione, or worldly Beauty. These two are Divine Love and Worldly Love, or Divine Beauty and Worldly Beauty, respectively. Thirdly, there is the male deity Love, otherwise known as Eros or Cupid, who is the offspring of Aphrodite-Venus. He corresponds to Christ as God of Love, or the Son of Love. He is the Sun-god. Generally speaking, within Rossetti's scheme, it is true to say that while the male Love is recognised as a deity in his own right, standing invisibly behind him, and often unacknowledged, is the greater power of his mother, the Great Goddess. They correspond to the image of Mary and Christ in Christian mythology. When Rossetti refers to male Love, he is to be seen as the representative of the Goddess Love. This is the basis of the mediaeval cult of Love from which the Troubadours, Dante, and ultimately Rossetti, drew both their mysticism and their inspiration. Once this has been established, it is not of any great importance under what name or guise each appears, as

the syncretic or theosophical method allows them to function interchangeably to produce an inclusive 'universal religion'. The only language suitable for this purpose is the universal language of symbolism.

Thus Rossetti establishes at the outset syncretic Love to be his major deity. It is Love, working through the poet that provides the experiential material for *The House of Life*. In these first two sonnets Rossetti, as it were, defines the terms with which he is working, these being the triple influence of the Lunar Goddess, and the Sun of Love.

When we see this, we are able to understand why *Love Enthroned* had to precede *Bridal Birth*. It stands not only as a Dantean statement of the supremacy of Love, but also as a definition of Love in syncretic terms. As we proceed further into *The House of Life*, we recognise the character of Love to be identical to that established in the *Vita Nuova*. It also corresponds exactly to Rossetti's painting *Dantis Amor*, in which the Sun and Moon (Christ and Beatrice) are shown as archetypal deities poised in perfect balance, while hovering between them is Love (as the 'child', or emanation of their interactive duality) who acts not only as the fulcrum of this balance, but also as the bond which is the motivating power of the universe. This is the motif of the scales suggested earlier. Astrologically, this is the sign of Libra, which is ruled by Venus, Goddess of Love. The association is not coincidental. The symbolic union of sun and moon is to play an important part in the following sonnets: it is the macrocosmic archetype standing behind the human actions of the poet; a notion derived from Renaissance sources, and from Shakespeare in particular. The lesser 'Powers' in Rossetti's sonnet, which have such an influence on the individual, are somewhat reminiscent of the astrological and magical 'Powers' which play an important part in the work of Ficino, Pico, and Bruno. In the Renaissance scheme of the universe, life in each sphere derives power and influence from the sphere above, and so the word 'Powers', when used by Rossetti, carries with it a supernatural implication. Rossetti's Powers also bear a strong resemblance to Petrarch's 'Triumphs', Love, Death, Fame, Time, and Divinity.¹

In Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*, Rossetti explores the process of the birth of love in the individual. The symbolic language of the sonnet derives directly from Dante and the Neoplatonists. 'The birth of love', takes place on two distinct levels. On the lower it

¹ 'Petrarch used a succession of triumphs to establish a hierarchy of values, with triumphant Love triumphed over by Chastity, Death, Fame, Time and Eternity in their turn': Gombrich, *Icones Symbolicae* in *Symbolic Images*, p.132, and fig.143.

refers to the birth of an emotional response, desire, towards the beloved. The higher refers to the birth of Love, characterised as a divine child within the individual, who is awoken by an awareness of the Beloved. Thus love and Love are the emotion and the deity respectively, while the beloved and the Beloved are the woman and the Goddess respectively. These co-exist, the former being a symbol of the latter.

In the opening line of the sonnet, 'desire, long darkling' is born as a child to the poet's lover as she recognises Love within her. Ficino's maxim, 'Love is desire awakened by Beauty', illustrates the entire octave. The word 'dawns', used to express the birth of desire, makes the analogy between Love and the sun. The poet is made aware of this moment as, 'Even so my Lady stood at gaze and smiled / When her soul knew at length the Love it nurs'd.' This Dantean phrase draws attention to the eyes and lips of the beloved which, as the pathways of joy, are the organs through which love is revealed. The eyes are the organs by which beauty, in the form of the beloved, is first perceived and by which it enters the soul, thus awakening love. In the *Vita Nuova*, the gaze of Beatrice upon Dante forms an essential part of her salutation. For Dante, it is more than enough to look at Beatrice:

I lifted mine eyes to look on those ladies, and then first perceived among them the excellent Beatrice. And when I perceived her, all my senses were overpowered by the great lordship that Love obtained, finding himself so near unto that most gracious being, until nothing but the spirits of sight remained to me; and even these remained driven out of their own instruments because Love entered in that honoured place of theirs, that so he might the better behold her. And although I was other than at first, I grieved for the spirits so expelled, which kept up a sore lament, saying: 'If he had not in this wise thrust us forth, we also should behold the marvel of this lady.'¹

¹ *Works*, II, 47-8. Dante's state of confusion in this passage may be forgiven, as it is almost certain that it occurred during the wedding feast of Beatrice: 'And they were assembled around a gentlewoman who was given in marriage on that day; the custom of the city being that these should bear her company when she sat down for the first time at table in the house of her husband': p.47. DG, in a footnote (p.48) adds: 'That she herself was the bride on this occasion might seem out of the question, from the fact of its not being in any way so stated: but on the other hand, Dante's silence throughout the *Vita Nuova* as regards her marriage (which must have brought deep sorrow even to his ideal love) is so startling, that we might almost be led to conceive in this passage the only intimation of it which he thought fit to give.'

As sight is central to the action of Beauty on the individual, so likewise is sound operating through the mouth and ears, as is shown in the second part of the octave:

at her heart Love lay
Quickening in darkness, till a voice that day
Cried on him, and the bonds of birth were burst.

Thus we see in Rossetti's sonnet the essential role played by eye, mouth, and ear in the birth and development of love in the individual. These symbols are again found in Sonnet 36, *Life-In-Love*, in which the first three lines express how life, in the form of love, is bestowed through them;

Not in thy body is thy life at all,
But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes;
Through these she yields thee life that vivifies...

Rossetti distinguishes himself from the Neoplatonist tradition by his insistence on the redeeming qualities of physical love, expressed by adding the hands to the symbols of mouth and eye. This thought is further developed in the poem *Love-Lily*.

To the Neoplatonists, Beauty was three-fold in character and reflected the three-fold nature of God. As such, its purpose was moral and not sensual:

It may pertain to the soul, to bodies, or to voices, and it is apprehended by the mind, the eye, and the ear respectively. If love, therefore, is the desire for beauty, and beauty is only perceived by the mind and the senses of sight and hearing, it must follow that love will be content with such perception and that the other senses can have no part in it. Sensual appetites are not love, but a madness that drags the mind toward deformity and deflects it from its proper state. They will consequently be hated and shunned by the true lover, who will scorn to profane the name of love by applying it to the disorders of passion.

... Beauty itself is the central term of the three-fold nature of God who is Good in creating the universe, Beautiful in winning created things back to

Himself, and Just in perfecting them to the utmost of their capacity when they once turn towards Him. For these same reasons He is the beginning, middle and end of all things since He both makes them and wins them back to Himself.¹

Dante responds to a poetic expression of the idea that human beauty in the beloved is the sum of all the beauty found in nature. In all the created world, there is nothing that reflects the Beauty of the Godhead so much as beauty in human form, a common theme among the Florentine Neoplatonists, exemplified in these lines from Angelo Poliziano:

She hath despoiled heaven of loveliness
And stolen all the wealth of Paradise;
Beggared the sun of light and radiantness
And gathered them into her glorious eyes.
All earth's most gracious gifts she doth possess,
Sweet laughter, fair and lofty courtesies;
And love hath given her his own look and tone
To make her fairest of all fairs alone.²

It is time to return to the sonnet. In line five of the octave, Rossetti states that Love has been 'Born with her life', where he has lain in darkness awaiting the call that will awaken him.³ Thus Love is equated with that spark of the divine trapped within the 'house of life' that is the earthly body. Rossetti treats the same theme in the sestet of the sonnet *On The Vita Nuova of Dante*:

At length within this book I found portrayed
Newborn that Paradisal Love of his,

¹ Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, p.77.

² Robb, p.124.

³ This piece of pure Platonism surely reveals the notion behind the title of the Pre-Raphaelite magazine, *The Germ*. It is that which lies dormant, 'quickening in darkness', awaiting the signal to germinate and burst forth. While no doubt also possessing revolutionary overtones with regard to art, religion, and society, it cannot fail to have connotations of an ideal religious nature also, indicating a step towards universal perfection. Thus Love would assume a Rosicrucian identity in the desire for a 'universal reformation' of man.

And simple like a child; with whose clear aid
I understood. To such a child as this,
Christ, charging well His chosen ones, forbade
Offence: 'for lo! of such my kingdom is.'

Here Rossetti joins a purely Platonic concept with Christianity in a manner that echoes Ficino.¹ In this instance Christ states that the kingdom of heaven is composed of such sacred children as Paradisal Love. There remains a difference between Christian and Platonic doctrine in that the Platonists believed that the soul existed in Paradise prior to its encapsulation within the human body, whereas Christian doctrine has it that each soul is created anew at the moment of the child's entry into the world. In *Bridal Birth*, there exists an element of ambiguity as the child Love is 'Born with her life'.

The Platonic concept of the spark of Love existing inside the individual in darkness is shared by the alchemists who sought to kindle this spark into the internal divine radiance which would enable the individual's return to the eternal source. This divine child, whom they saw as the living Christ within themselves, equates to Rossetti's 'Paradisal Love'. By whatever name it went, it was the true homunculus of the alchemist created and nurtured in the Hermetic vessel of his own soul. Thus, in this one sonnet, there exists a resonant mixture of associations; Platonic, Dantean, Christian, and alchemical. To these must be added the mythological.

In the sestet of *Bridal Birth*, we are presented with a new set of images. The child Love has now developed into a full-grown deity, and the roles are now reversed. Instead of this child being both internal and dependent upon the lovers, he is now external and in charge of the situation. He shelters the lovers beneath his wings like a great bird: 'his full-grown feet now range / The grove, and his warm hands our couch prepare'.² The image recalls Rossetti's watercolour paintings *Roman de la Rose*³ and *Love's Greeting*.⁴ But here, the mediaeval Rose Garden has been replaced by something altogether older, the grove.

¹ It was Ficino's belief that the work of Plato prefigured Christianity. The only essential difference between the two, in his view, was that the figure of Christ was absent from Plato's writings.

² Compare this with Genesis 3.8, where Adam and Eve 'hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden'.

³ Surtees Cat no. 126 R.I. Tate Gallery.

⁴ Surtees Cat no. 126, plate 195. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Boston.

The grove is essential to a full understanding of the climax of this sonnet. 'Grove' is a word that occurs regularly in Rossetti's poetry¹ - *Willow-wood* is itself a grove, and the last line of the last sonnet of the quartet, 'Till both our heads were in his aureole' reflects the last line of *Bridal Birth*; 'Leaves us for light the halo of his hair.' These two groves, however, are contrasting, one standing for gain, and the other for loss.

A grove is either a plantation, or a thinning of a wood, in contrast to the tangle of raw nature in which Dante found himself lost at the start of the *Divine Comedy*. Groves, such as the famous groves of Dodona and Nemi, or the Druidic oak groves of northern Europe, are usually associated with religious ritual. They are precincts dedicated to a deity, sacred places in which that deity is invoked. The grove in Rossetti's sonnet is where Love's 'full-grown feet now range'.

The grove also has connotations of ritual sacrifice, and this is implicit in the last three lines of the sonnet:

Till to his song our bodiless souls in turn
Be born his children, when Death's nuptial change
Leaves us for light the halo of his hair.

Love, having been born in the lovers, now claims them for his own. The final line of the sonnet tells us who Love is: 'the halo of his hair' is the 'coruscating hair' of the Sun-god of Sonnet 70, *The Hill Summit*, of Fludd's Phoebus, 'glittering with his golden hair', and Swinburne's 'The splendour that burns on his head'. The sacred grove is that of the Sun-god, the Sun of Love, and 'Death's nuptial change' is the enactment of the ritual of the Sacred Marriage, for which 'his warm hands our couch prepare'.

I have stated that *The Sonnet* is dedicated to the Moon, and *Love Enthroned* to the Sun. Here in *Bridal Birth*, the Sun and Moon symbolically conjoin in man to lift him from an earthly to a heavenly state. The lovers are to be quite literally 'transfigured', as the final line of this sonnet proclaims.

The grove at Nemi was sacred to Diana, the goddess of woodlands, fertility and wild animals. As a goddess of natural increase, she had a special role to play during

¹ It occurs in the following: Son. 9, *Passion and Worship*; Son. 39, *Sleepless Dreams*; Son. 45, *Secret Parting*; Son. 96, *Life the Beloved*; *Love's Nocturn*, st. 11; *Plighted Promise*, st. 2; *New Year's Burden*, st. 2; *A Little While*, st. 2; *The Doom of the Sirens*, scene 2; and *Venus Verticordia*.

childbirth, the subject of this sonnet, although, here, the birth is of a spiritual nature. Of importance to us here is the ceremony of the sacred marriage enacted at Nemi, the culmination of which was the ritual slaying of the King of the Wood. The sacred marriage was a fertility ritual which was enacted annually to ensure the abundance of crops, herds, and humans. To ensure this, it was necessary for the goddess to have a partner, and he was the solar 'Year King', who must die in order to be born anew, full of vigour and 'new life'.

This mythology, the basis of all western mystery religions, is the major theme underlying all Rossetti's work; he returns to it repeatedly in both his paintings and his poetry. In this sonnet, the oldest of myths, that of sexual fertility, is transformed into a myth of spiritual fertility. Rossetti does not deny, as did the Christians and Neoplatonists, the sexual act which was an essential part of the older religions, but sees it as an essential part of the transformation of man. For him, it is through sexual love that the ideal is obtained. Here, the Sun of Love prepares the couch on which the lovers will celebrate their union. This is to be a human enactment of the archetypal union of the Sun-god and the Lunar Goddess. It is also an attempt to unite body and soul, another dominant theme in Rossetti's work. In this symbolic motif, Rossetti moves away from the Neoplatonic model, for it was the Neoplatonic desire to bring about a separation of soul from body, the latter of which prevented the former from achieving union with the Godhead.

The element of death is essential here. In the old religions it was a ritual death that ensured life. Rossetti achieves a form of death through the sexual act, but it is a symbolic death of the self, the sacrifice of 'self' to 'other'. In this it is the recovered true Self of the Platonic severed souls that is achieved. That which has suffered separation in the descent is reunited, and in so doing achieves its former Paradisal state. A state of transcendental ecstasy is achieved, as the lovers undergo a transfiguration into a state of light that parallels the experience of Dante and all successful mystics. In his *Poema Visione*, the Neoplatonist Giovanni Nesi reflects on this union of lovers:

So lives the lover in the loved one now,
Transforms himself to him, and is made one,
As love's clear seal declares upon his brow...

A joyful death which joins two lives in one
A joyful life which in that being fair
Wakes love and gives content's oblivion.¹

The achievement of the transcendental state of pure light completes the cycle as the united lovers - now one - are born into the Godhead, just as the Godhead had been born into them: 'As when desire, long darkling, dawns'.... 'and the bonds of birth were burst.' This presents us with an image of a glorious sunrise, which is compatible with the sun-symbolism of the poem. The new day of the soul is compared to a new day of the world itself in which Nature is glorified in the burst of radiance. A similar expression of this idea may be found in Swinburne's poem *Tenebrae*:

We pray not, we, to behold
The latter august new birth,
The young day's purple and gold,
All divine, and risen as of old,
The sun-god Freedom on earth.²

The words 'his full-grown feet now range / The grove', bring to mind the effect of the sun at noon dappling the leafy grove and warming the sward which is to be a couch for the lovers. The natural world is here indistinguishable from the symbolic; indeed it is literally the 'transfigured life' of a new Eden. In the last line, there is a certain ambiguity in the words 'Leaves us for light', which in this context brings to mind the image of sunlight dancing through the leaves of the grove. This is echoed by Swinburne, again in the poem *Tenebrae*: 'Seeing each life given is a leaf / Of the manifold multiform flower'.³ Similar images are to be found in *Plighted Promise*: 'Where the inmost leaf is stirred / With the heart-beat of the grove', and *The Portrait*: 'It seemed each sun-thrilled blossom there / Beat like a heart among the leaves.' Sun, heart, and flower combine in a

¹ Robb, p.288.

² *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed, by Sir William Gosse and Thomas James Wise, 20 vols (London: William Heineman, 1925-27), II, 155. Originally published in *Songs Before Sunrise*, 1871.

³ Stanza 20.

single Rosicrucian symbol, in which the lovers are the leaves of the bloom. A similar symbolic image is found in Rossetti's drawing, *The Roseleaf*.¹ Leaves in the context of a forest represent matter which impedes the progress of sunlight: in Sonnet 69, *Autumn Idleness*, the deer are 'dappled white and dun' where 'the sun / Had marked them with the shade of forest-leaves'.

On a more prosaic level, this sonnet may be considered as a kind of initiation ritual through which the reader must pass in order to gain access to *The House of Life*. In all mystery cults, from those at Eleusis to the Masons, the initiate must first undergo the ritualised sacrifice of the 'Self' - 'the death of the Self', or ego, - before he can be reborn into the 'New Life' of the spirit. That Rossetti uses this particular motif here, at the start of *The House of Life* is, I think, no coincidence. Here in the sacred grove, the mortal poet undergoes an initiatory wedding to his muse and patroness, the Great Goddess to whom he is dedicated. In doing so, he dies to his mortal nature, and is reborn into a higher life, in a similar manner to Lucius Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*. Rossetti may well have recognised in himself the struggles of Lucius with his lower nature.

If this sonnet is about the birth of Love - and the birth into Love - Sonnet 30, *Last Fire*, is a reflection on the after effects:

Love, through your spirit and mine what summer eve
Now glows with glory of all things possess'd,
Since this day's sun of rapture filled the west
And the light sweetened as the fire took leave?

In the octave, the grove that we formerly saw clad in summer leaves - Swinburne's ambiguous 'latter august new birth' - now only looks forward to winter's bareness:

Many the days that Winter keeps in store,
Sunless throughout, or whose brief sun-glimpses
Scarce shed the heaped snow through the naked trees.

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 215, plate 309. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Similarly, as the sonnet *Bridal Birth* opens *The House of Life* with the image of Love as a newborn child, so the sequence is brought to a close with Sonnets 99 and 100, *Newborn Death*, I and II. The similarity between the first lines of *Bridal Birth* and *Newborn Death*, I, is worth noticing:

As when desire, long darkling, dawns, and first
The mother looks upon the newborn child,
Even so my Lady stood at gaze and smiled
When her soul knew at length the Love it nurs'd.

To-Day Death seems to me an infant child
Which her worn mother Life upon my knee
Has set to grow my friend and play with me.

The pathos of these last lines is striking; it is almost as if Rossetti's still-born daughter has been sent from the spiritual world to prepare him for his own death. But in the wider scheme of the cyclical nature of *The House of Life*, characterised by the ouroboros surrounding Alpha and Omega in Rossetti's illustration for *The Sonnet*, we are returned to the essential truth of the last line of Sonnet 48, *Death-In-Love*:

I and this Love are one, and I am Death.

CHAPTER 3

SONNETS 49-52, *WILLOW-WOOD*.

‘Gabriel has just written a series of four sonnets - *Willow-wood* - about the finest thing he has done. I see the poetical impulse is upon him again: he even says he ought never to have been a painter, but a poet instead.’

WM Rossetti’s Diary, 18 December 1868.¹

‘All is given under forms at once concrete and subtle.’²

Willow-wood, placed in the strategic mid-point of *The House of Life*, may be seen as the central hinge about which the symbolic narrative turns. It is helpful to begin with a slight detour via Rossetti’s poem, *An Old Song Ended*, which narrates the tale of a woman who dies while her lover is absent. It begins:

*‘How should I your true love know
From another one?’
‘By his cockle-hat and staff
And his sandal-shoon.’*

This first stanza repeats a snatch of song sung by Ophelia in her madness.³ Thus *An Old Song Ended* is Rossetti’s extension of the lament of Ophelia who dies awaiting the return of Hamlet:

*‘Nay, but leave my face unveiled
And unbound my hair.’*

¹ Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.367.

² WMR, *Designer and Writer*, p.216.

³ ‘Hamlet, Prince of Denmark’, Act IV, Scene 5, in *The Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by William George Clark and William Aldis Wright (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1864), 811-846 (p.836).

‘Can you say to me some word
I shall say to him?’
‘Say I’m looking in his eyes
Though my eyes are dim.’

So ends the Song. The final stanza, above, contains an element of ‘transference’ through the eyes of a third party that we find repeated in *Willow-wood*, I. Ophelia’s death is reported by the Queen to Laertes:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them:
There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element: but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

(IV.7.167)

These lines provided the basis for Millais' famous painting, *Ophelia*¹ (Fig.3), in which Ophelia, modelled by Elizabeth Siddal, is depicted floating to her death with her hair spread out around her head in the water. In Sonnet 49, the first of the *Willow-wood* quartet, Millais' picture is recalled as the poet describes Love:

with his foot and with his wing-feathers
He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth.
Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there

The vision is of Ophelia, and this Ophelia is Elizabeth Siddal.² In *Hamlet*, Ophelia dies after Hamlet has rejected her love and departed. Similarly, in *An Old Song Ended*, the lady dies while the lover is far away, chasing his dream of chivalry. The reference can only be to Elizabeth Siddal, who likewise died in Rossetti's absence. In the cases of both Ophelia and Elizabeth, the nature of their deaths was ambiguous; it is not certain whether they intended to take their own lives or whether their deaths were accidental. What is implicit is the nature of Rossetti's part in the tragedy; his lack of love for Elizabeth, and his absence from her on the night she died. More than this, her death could be seen as a direct result of his neglect. In addition, the passage spoken by the Queen carries a further implication: the detail of the description of Ophelia's death leads one to believe that she could have been saved. It is told as if an observer had watched the incident and done nothing to prevent its outcome. Whether or not this was intended in *Hamlet*, the theatrical device has been turned by Rossetti to point a self-accusatory finger at himself. Here one must recall the last lines of *An Old Song Ended*: "Say I'm looking in his eyes / Though my eyes are dim." The lines, "Nay leave my face unveiled / And unbound my hair", recall not only Ophelia's face as she floated away, but also Lizzie's face in her coffin beside which Rossetti placed the only complete manuscript copy of his poems. That face not only haunts him, it accuses him.

¹ *The Pre-Raphaelites*, Tate Gallery Exhibition Catalogue (London: Tate Gallery / Penguin, 1984), Cat. no. 40. Hereafter referred to as 'Tate Gallery Cat.'. Tate Gallery.

² That Elizabeth Siddal became ill as a result of posing for many hours in a bath of cold water for this painting also adds to the significance - and the guilt - contained in the image.

Rossetti uses the incident of Ophelia's death to express his own remorse, and this may be the primary basis of *Willow-wood*. It is another example of the ill-defined border-line between reality and art that characterises Rossetti's creative imagination. Does art mirror life, or life, art? As Rossetti entwines the one with the other, we can never be sure. For him, life must be seen as a work of art, because the only reality he endows with any significance, is art. Stillman wrote that art was:

the dominant interest of existence, not only of his own, but of existence *per se*, and he tolerated nothing that sacrificed it to material or purely intellectual subjects. The artist was to him, the ultimate ratio of humanity, and he used to say frankly that artists had nothing to do with morality, and practically, but in a gentle and benevolent way, he made that the guiding principle of his conduct.¹

Thus, for Rossetti, there was in effect no dividing line between art and life, as is demonstrated in his story *St Agnes of Intercession*. Likewise, Rossetti and Siddal were Dante and Beatrice, just as here they *are* Hamlet and Ophelia.² Siddal, the model for Beatrice and Ophelia, herself died in circumstances as enigmatic as the deaths of these two heroines. In neither the *Vita Nuova* nor *Hamlet* does the reader observe the actual death of Beatrice or Ophelia; one is simply confronted with the finality of the situation as it is related second-hand. Likewise, in both cases, the lover was also absent from the scene, being altogether helpless to alter its outcome. This is the sense of guilt and anguish that is expressed to the reader in *Willow-wood*. Rossetti hides this in allegory because it is too painful a truth to be spoken of openly, and the only way he has to communicate his grief is through his vision. Once again, it is an example of 'transfigured life'.

This is not the view of Doughty. He suggests that the *Willow-wood* sonnets are not about Lizzie at all, but express Rossetti's longing for Jane Morris:

¹ Doughty, p.429.

² The pathos of this is illustrated by Sharp, who noted that on the frame of the later version of *Hamlet and Ophelia*, 1866, Rossetti painted 'What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?': *DGR*, p.199. Surtees, Cat. no. 189, plate 279, does not mention this. The idea of the philosopher caught between earth and heaven is very much in the alchemical vein, illustrating the dual nature of man who is half beast, half angel. These potentialities appear in the work of the Rosicrucian, Robert Fludd. The tempestuous nature of the relationship between Rossetti and Siddal is illustrated by Rossetti's descriptions of his earlier version of the same subject, as noted by Surtees, Cat. no. 108.

The four *Willow-wood* sonnets surely celebrated, as a whole, the ending of the long years of silence, severance, disappointment, and frustration in the 'Willow-wood' through which he had wandered, haunted by

The shades of those our days that had no tongue.

For the *Willow-wood* sonnets apparently record a belated but mutual admission of a long-suppressed passion, and in the canonization of the two Lovers by Love himself. ... the sonnets are nearly always lightly misinterpreted by commentators as an expression of Rossetti's passionate longing for reunion with his dead wife.¹

It seems hard to see how Doughty can arrive at this position, for *Willow-wood* describes a haunting, a loss, rather than a celebration of the 'mutual admission of a long-suppressed passion'. Doughty's argument seems inconsistent with the third sonnet, in which Love sings:

What fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood,
What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night,
Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed
Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite
Your lips to that their unforgotten food,
Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!

And with the second sonnet:

his was such a song
So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free,
As souls disused in death's sterility
May sing when the new birthday tarries long.

The 'new birthday' is referred to in the last two lines of stanza 19 of *The Blessed Damozel*, in which Mary and her five handmaidens 'fashion the birth-robes for them /

¹ Doughty, p.384.

Who are just born, being dead.’ The souls in *Willow-wood* are surely the souls of the dead who have not yet been reborn in heaven. Such words as ‘fathom-depth’ must surely apply to a burial, and ‘soul-struck widowhood’ seems entirely unambiguous; indeed ‘willow-wood’ is used as a rhyme for ‘widowhood’. That Love sings that the poet has ‘so in vain wooed / Your last hope lost’ appears incompatible with the declaration of a newly admitted passion. The whole sequence concerns death and implied suicide, the tone throughout being one of abject misery.

Doughty continues:

Indeed a few months later, when Christina Rossetti wrote another poem of severance, entitling it *An Echo From Willow-wood*, William long afterwards suggested that while her poem *might* refer to Gabriel and Lizzie, he thought it much more probable that a reference was intended to a ‘wholly different train of events’; by which he probably meant the relations between Janey Morris and Rossetti, the inspiration it would seem, of almost the whole of *The House of Life*, not to mention other poems written during these years.¹

In his paraphrase of *The House of Life*, William would seem to confirm this view, writing of *Willow-wood*:

The four sonnets named Willow-wood represent, in a general sense, the pangs of severance... By ‘severance’ we might understand ‘severance by death,’ for both the word and the idea extend to that; but severance by untoward conditions on earth appears to be more particularly contemplated in these sonnets.²

In his article *The Stealthy School of Criticism*, Rossetti says of *Willow-wood* that:

¹ Ibid, p.384. In Christina Rossetti, *New Poems*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti, (London: Macmillan, 1896), WMR notes of *An Echo From Willow-wood*: ‘I incline to think that Christina’s sonnet is intended to refer to the love and marriage of my brother and Miss Siddal, and to her early death in 1862’: p.385. Both WMR’s and Doughty’s comments assume that Christina’s poem is a repetition of her brother’s emotions rather than an expression of her own sense of severance, which she adds to that of her brother as its ‘echo’ within her own heart.

² WMR, *Designer and Writer*, p.216.

‘The sonnet describes a dream or trance of divided love momentarily re-united by the longing fancy; and in the imagery of the dream, the face of the beloved rises through deep dark waters to kiss the lover.’¹

But which beloved? William’s use of the word ‘severance’ encourages us to look at Sonnet 40, *Severed Selves* (1871), which contains many of the images present in *Willow-wood*.

Two separate divided silences,
Which , brought together, would find loving voice;
Two glances which together would rejoice
In love, now lost like stars beyond dark trees;
Two hands apart whose touch alone gives ease;
Two bosoms which, heart-shrined with mutual flame,
Would, meeting in one clasp, be made the same;
Two souls, the shores wave mocked of sundering seas:-

Such are we now. Ah! may our hope forecast
Indeed one hour again, when on this stream
Of darkened love once more the light shall gleam? -
An hour how slow to come, how quickly past, -
Which blooms and fades, and only leaves at last,
Faint as shed flowers, the attenuated dream.

This sonnet - one could almost describe it as *Willow-wood* without the ghosts - takes up the same theme, but without any suggestion of death. The beloved, although absent, is quite obviously alive. The ‘hour of love’, - for which the poet waits in *The Streams Secret*, - is here symbolised by the same image of flowers as in the octave of *Willow-wood*, IV:

as meeting rose and rose

¹ *Works*, I, 480-488 (pp.483-4).

Together cling through the wind's wellaway
Nor change at once, yet near the end of day
The leaves drop loosened where the heart-stain glows.

The flower, in both cases, is the Rosicrucian Rose of Love, and the image in the last lines of these two poems, in which the petals fall, recurs again in *The Song of the Bower*. In *Severed Selves*, the symbol of Rosicrucian fire - the Flame of Love - is present in the line 'Two bosoms ... heart-shrined with mutual flame'.

In *The Stream's Secret*, started at Penkill in 1869, and finished at Scalands in 1870, we have what is, in effect, an extended version of *Willow-wood*. In this poem the lover is anticipating the hour of his re-union with the beloved, and there is no implication that the beloved is dead; in fact, just the opposite. *The Stream's Secret* is in a sense an expansion of the question posed in the sestet of *Severed Selves*:

may our hope forecast
Indeed one hour again, when on this stream
Of darkened love once more the light shall gleam?

When this will be, 'the hour of love', when the lovers again meet, is the 'secret thing'
Love imparts to the waters of the stream:

Say, hath not Love leaned low
This hour beside thy far well-head,
And there through jealous hollowed fingers said
The thing that most I long to know. (St.2)

The imagery parallels that of *Willow-wood*. The difference is that in this poem the poet and Love are symbolically separated by the length of the stream. However, it is the same vision of the beloved that the poet seeks:

Shall Time not still endow
One hour with life, and I and she

Slake in one kiss the thirst of memory? (St.4)

There is also a hint of the spectres of *Willow-wood*:

Nay, why
Name the dead hours? I mind them well:
Their ghosts in many darkened doorways dwell
With desolate eyes to know them by. (St.5)

This is an echo of the lines in *Willow-wood* II:

And I was made aware of a dumb throng
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,
The shades of those our days that had no tongue.

The presence of death and suicide within the sonnets of *Willow-wood* can be understood as referring to Rossetti's relationship with Jane Morris if we are prepared to accept that their function is symbolic rather than literal. Death in this case refers to the spiritual death experienced by each of the lovers when they are separated, but also, more specifically to the *time* spent apart. While I believe the suggestion of suicide refers to Lizzie, the metaphorical 'suicide' of the self and the hours spent alone and 'severed' from the beloved, refer to the 'lost days' of mutual separation. This is borne out by Sonnet 86, *Lost Days* (1862), which describes the slow death of the self in days without purpose; that is, days spent in separation from the beloved:

The lost days of my life until to-day,
What were they, could I see them on the street
Lie as they fell?

I do not see them here; but after death
God knows I know the faces I shall see,

Each one a murdered self, with low last breath.

‘I am thyself, - what hast thou done to me?’

‘And I - and I - thyself,’ (lo! each one saith,)

‘And thou thyself to all eternity!’

In stanzas two and three of *Parted Presence*, the same theme is expressed:

Your eyes are afar to-day,

Yet, love, look now in mine eyes.

Two hearts sent forth may despise

All dead things by the way.

All between is decay,

Dead hours and this hour that dies.

O love, look deep in mine eyes!

.

The hourglass sheds its sands

All day for the dead hour’s bier.

The poem *Spherical Change* continues the theme:

In this new shade of Death, the show

Passes me still of form and face;

Some bent, some gazing as they go,

Some swiftly, some at a dull pace,

Not one that speaks in any case. (St.1)

.

O dearest! while we lived and died

A living death in every day,

Some hours we still were side by side,

When where I was you too might stay

And rest and need not go away. (St.3)

The same theme is treated in Sonnet 38, *The Morrow's Message*.

Willow-wood II continues:

They looked on us, and knew us and were known;
While fast together, alive from the abyss,
Clung the soul-wrung implacable close-kiss;
And pity of self through all made broken moan
Which said, 'For once, for once, for once alone!'

Emphasis should be given here to the words '*alive* from the abyss' and the phrase 'For once, for once, for once alone!' Undeniably, at this moment, the beloved is not dead, and the stress of the thrice repeated phrase emphasises that this snatched moment alone carries its own special significance. This cannot appropriately refer to Lizzie, for Rossetti had already spent the last six years alone with the shade of his wife. The implication is that this moment was shared with another, that is, the wife of his close friend Morris. 'For once, for once, for once alone!' refers not to the separation of the lovers, but that they are alone *together*. In *The Streams Secret*, it is this moment for which the poet longs, and it reaches an emotional and imaginative climax in the following stanzas, before ebbing away again as the poem reverts to a mood of loss and despair:

Stands it not by the door -
Love's Hour - till she and I shall meet;
With bodiless form and unapparent feet
That cast no shadow yet before,
Though round its head the dawn begins to pour
The breath that makes day sweet? (ST.28)

Its eyes invisible
Watch till the dial's thin-thrown shade
Be born, - yea, till the journeying line be laid
Upon the point that wakes the spell,

And there in lovelier light than tongue can tell
Its presence stand array'd.

But oh! when now her foot
Draws near, for whose sake night and day
Were long in weary longing sighed away, -
The Hour of Love, 'mid airs grown mute,
Shall sing beside the door, and Love's own lute
Thrill to the passionate lay. (St.30)

Yet again Love is compared to the sun, whose approach dispels the darkness of lonely severance from the beloved. In *Willow-wood II*, the words 'alive from the abyss' remind us, not only of Orpheus's rescue of Eurydice from Tartarus, but also of Rossetti's painting *Proserpine*, 1873-7¹ (Fig.4), a painting which symbolically describes just such a moment as that in *Willow-wood II*. It pictures Jane as Proserpine, Queen of the Underworld, who, in Rossetti's words,

had eaten one grain of a pomegranate, and this enchained her to her new empire and destiny. She is represented in a gloomy corridor of her palace, with the fatal fruit in her hand. As she passes, a gleam strikes on the wall behind her from some inlet suddenly opened, and admitting for a moment the light of the upper world; and she glances furtively towards it, immersed in thought. The incense-burner stands beside her as the attribute of a goddess.²

In his sonnet for the painting, Rossetti describes this moment:

Afar away the light that brings cold cheer
Unto this wall,³ - one instant and no more

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 233, plate 331. Tate Gallery. Rossetti produced eight versions of this painting.

² Ibid.

³ Sharp suggests, *DGR*, p.237, that 'the almost unearthly light that the moon casts for a few brief moments into the gloomy corridors of Pluto's palace', is 'a casual ray from the moon, as it circles above the earth, [and] penetrates the surrounding gloom': p.235. Sharp's insistence that the light is lunar shows that he is aware of that this is a characteristic of the goddess.

Admitted at my distant palace-door.

 Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing
 Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign:
 And still some heart unto some soul doth pine,
 (Whose sounds mine inner sense is fain to bring,
 Continually together murmuring,) -
 'Woe's me for thee, unhappy Proserpine!'

This painting is commonly understood as a metaphor for Jane's unhappy existence with Morris. In the sonnet for this painting, the word 'wall' suggests the 'well' in *Willow-wood*, as does the brief illumination with her rising 'from this Tartarean grey / That chills me' to briefly join her lover in the upper world as; 'in the imagery of the dream, the face of the beloved rises through deep dark waters to kiss the lover.' The painting of *Proserpine* is almost a depiction of *Willow-wood*, and in a letter to Leyland, Rossetti describes it in such terms:

The whole tone of the picture is a gradation of greys - from the watery blue-grey of the dress to the dim hue of the marble, all aiding the 'Tartarean grey' which must be the sentiment of the subject.¹

Morris, by implication cast in the role of Pluto, keeps his unwilling wife captive in an unloved realm, and it is this that is the cause of the soul's death, both her own and Rossetti's. The sestet of the sonnet for *Proserpine* echoes the sentiments of *The Streams Secret* and also the 'dream or trance of divided love' in *Willow-wood*. Closely connected with the sonnet for *Proserpine* is the following fragment entitled *Memory*, one of the themes of the painting:

Is Memory most of miseries miserable,
 Or the one flower of ease in bitterest hell?

¹ Tate Gallery Cat., p.232.

The question seems to be answered by Love in the last two lines of *Willow-wood* III:

Better all life forget her than this thing,
That Willowwood should hold her wandering!

In mythology, the true love of 'unhappy Proserpine' was of course Apollo, who resided with her in the underworld for six months of the year.

All the preceding ideas are brought together in one painting by Rossetti, entitled *Water-willow*¹ (Fig.5), for which Jane was the model. Although this was completed in 1871, two and a half years after the *Willow-wood* quartet was written, it is important in displaying a direct connection between the ideas associated with the willow and Jane Morris. In this painting, Jane *is* the willow. Behind her flows the Thames at Kelmscott:

In August my brother was getting on with a small picture having a river-background: no doubt this must be the half-figure of Mrs Morris now entitled *Water-willow*, which he regarded with predilection.²

Rossetti himself commented: 'I can't be bothered to stick idle names on things now - a head is a head; and fools won't buy heads on that footing.'³ This is a characteristic example of Rossetti's commentary standing in direct opposition to his practice. However, he later wrote of this painting that its subject was, 'as it were, speaking to you, and embodying in her expression the penetrating sweetness of the scene and season.'⁴ Here Rossetti is unable to disguise the affection he feels for his model. The willow that stands for the tears and anguish of parted love is portrayed in a moment of brief happiness - Proserpine has ascended into the light of summer, and 'loves hour' has arrived.

The imagery of *Water-willow* is almost exactly replicated in Rossetti's early poem, *A Last Confession*:

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 226, plate 324. Bancroft Collection, Wilmington Society of Fine Arts, Delaware.

² WMR, *Designer and Writer*, p.75.

³ Ibid, p.75-6.

⁴ Ibid, p.102.

Her face was pearly pale, as when one stoops
 Over wan water; and the dark crisped hair
 And the hair's shadow made it paler still: -
 Deep-serried locks, the dimness of the cloud
 Where the moon's gaze is set in eddying gloom.
 Her body bore her neck as the tree's stem
 Bears the top branch; and as the branch sustains
 The flower of the year's pride, her high neck bore
 That face made wonderful with night and day.

Her great eyes,
 That sometimes turned half dizzily beneath
 The passionate lids, as faint, when she would speak,
 Had also in them hidden springs of mirth,
 Which under the dark lashes evermore
 Shook to her to laugh, as when a bird flies low
 Between the water and the willow-leaves,
 And the shade quivers till he wins the light.¹ (St.13)

This interpretation of Jane as the water-willow of the Willow-wood bears out Doughty's suggestion. It is my belief that Rossetti is here combining two situations; the 'severance' of Lizzie's suicide, - and the consequent guilt he experienced, - and the separation he was now experiencing from his new beloved, Jane. Both kinds of 'severance' are here combined in a single expression of anguish and grief. A study of Jane, entitled *The Lady of Pity*, 1870,² is closely related to *Proserpine* in that it contains the same elements of light-symbolism, and probably provided the germ of the idea for *Proserpine*, which was painted later, in 1873. The studies were later developed into the painting *La Donna della Finestra* in 1879,³ although this later picture differs

¹ It is worth noting the conjunction of woman and tree in this passage, the symbolism of which is examined in detail in later chapters. In particular, the lines 'Her body bore her neck as the tree's stem / Bears the top branch; and as the branch sustains / The flower of the year's pride', carry important Rosicrucian associations. The detail of this imagery is replicated in a slightly different form in Rossetti's drawing, *The Roseleaf* (Surtees Cat. no. 215).

² Surtees Cat. no. 255A, plate 384. Bradford Art Gallery and Museums.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 255, plate 383. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

considerably from Rossetti's original conception. The figure known as 'the lady of pity', or 'la donna della finestra', derives from Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Dante, having passed the anniversary of the death of Beatrice, and still in deep mourning, tells how,

I lifted mine eyes to look; and then perceived a young and very beautiful lady, who was gazing upon me from a window with a gaze full of pity, so that the very sum of pity appeared gathered together in her. And seeing that unhappy persons, when they beget compassion in others, are then most moved unto weeping, as though they also felt pity for themselves, it came to pass that mine eyes began to be inclined unto tears.¹

Dante's story continues in a manner that recalls Rossetti's relationship with Jane:

And I know that often, when I could not weep nor in any way give ease unto mine anguish, I went to look upon this lady, who seemed to bring the tears into my eyes by the mere sight of her.²

At length, by the constant sight of this lady, mine eyes began to be gladdened overmuch with her company; through which thing many times I had much unrest, and rebuked myself as a base person: also, many times I cursed the unsteadfastness of mine eyes, and said to them inwardly: 'Was not your grievous condition of weeping wont one while to make others weep? And will ye now forget this thing because a lady looketh upon you? who so looketh merely in compassion of the grief ye then showed for your own blessed lady.'³

The sight of this lady brought me into so unwonted a condition that I often thought of her as of one too dear unto me; and I began to consider her thus: 'This lady is young, beautiful, gentle, and wise: perchance it was Love himself who set her in my path, that so my life might find peace.' And there were times when I thought yet more fondly, until my heart consented unto its reasoning.

¹ *Works*, II, 85-6.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p.87.

‘And wilt thou, having suffered so much tribulation through Love, not escape while yet thou mayst from so much bitterness? Thou must surely know that this thought carries with it the desire of Love, and drew its life from the gentle eyes of that lady who vouchsafed thee so much pity.’¹

Dante might be speaking for Rossetti and his inner turmoil, here, of the lost wife who had always stood as a symbol for Beatrice, and the sense of betrayal and guilt as he turns to another with a growing ‘desire of Love’. The transference of Rossetti’s love from Lizzie to Jane is detailed in Sonnet 37, *The Love Moon*:

‘When that dead face, bowered in the furthest years,
Which once was all the life years held for thee,
Can now scarce bid the tides of memory
Cast on thy soul a little spray of tears, -
How canst thou gaze in these eyes of hers
Whom now thy heart delights in, and not see
Within each orb Love’s philtred euphrasy²
Make them of buried troth remembrancers?’

‘Nay, pitiful Love, nay, loving Pity! Well
Thou knowest that in these twain I have confess’d
Two very voices of thy summoning bell.
Nay, Master, shall not Death make manifest
In these the culminant changes which approve
The love-moon that must light my soul to Love?’

The first three lines of the sestet indicate that the two loves are twin manifestations of the single universal Love: ‘Two very voices of thy summoning bell’.

Rossetti seems to intend his reader to believe that the *Willow-wood* sonnets concern his wife and the manner of her death. But at the same time he represents in disguise his

¹ Ibid, pp.88-9.

² ‘Eye-bright’, a herb used as an eye-salve. However, this is ambiguous, coming from the Greek *euphrasia*, meaning ‘delight’.

true feelings about Jane Morris. The guilt that Rossetti experienced over Lizzie's death is doubly compounded here: it was at this time that he was planning Lizzie's exhumation in order to retrieve his lost manuscript poems as well as harbouring an illicit and overwhelming passion for his close friend's wife. The image in *Willow-wood* of the rising of the beloved 'from the abyss' anticipates the raising of the poet's wife from the grave, and it is possible that this event prompted the writing of the sonnets. This is why, although Rossetti now loved Jane, his old love was also so present in his mind at this time. Thus both loves could be combined within the single theme of 'severance'.

Willow-wood, like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, contains four levels of symbolic imagery. The first level 'describes a dream or trance of divided love momentarily re-united by longing fancy'; the second is an emotional response, in symbolic imagery, to the suicide of his wife; the third is an emotional response, hidden beneath this imagery, to his desire for and separation from Jane (the symbolic suicide of the 'lost days'); and the fourth, which we are now about to explore, is a level of mythological reference. These 'transfigure' the underlying themes of worldly experience onto a higher, timeless, and universal plane.

'To wear the willow', is, according to *Brewer's*, 'To go into mourning, especially for a sweetheart or bride, to bewail a lost lover', as in the popular folk song: 'All around my hat, I shall wear the green willow / All around my hat, for a twelve-month and a day.'¹ The 'twelve-month and a day' is a version of 'a year and a day', a familiar time-span in folk-mythology. The reference is, in fact, to the ancient pagan lunar year, which consisted of the thirteen months of the lunar cycle (13 months of 28 days = 364 days + 1). The willow was sacred to the Lunar-goddess because it loves to grow near water, over which she has dominion. Again, the willow is the tree of tears; it is the weeping willow, which is why it is the tree of mourning, and especially mourning for a lost love, as the moon is feminine and governs the emotions, especially love. Desdemona's Willow Song in *Othello* uses the willow's symbolic associations with unrequited love, and abandonment:

She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad
And did forsake her. She had a song of 'Willow;'

¹ *All Around My Hat.*

An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it.¹

Rossetti made a drawing of Desdemona singing the Willow Song, which he entitled *Desdemona's Death Song*, c.1879-81.² In Rossetti's poem *A Death Parting*, he uses the symbol of the willow in a repetitive though changing refrain that recalls the structure of *Willow, Willow, Willow*. The repeated refrain of the first and last stanza '(Water-willow and wellaway)', and the phrase 'days decline' in the second stanza echo the use of 'the winds wellaway' and 'the end of day' in the first four lines of the octave of *Willow-wood IV*. The motifs of severance, 'a secret sign' ('a secret thing' in *Willow-wood I*), the embrace and kiss, and the hope of a future meeting, are again brought together.

The willow is mentioned in Psalm 137, which Christina used as a basis for her poem *By the Waters of Babylon*, dated 1st December 1861.³ The second stanza bears a remarkable similarity to the imagery of *Willow-wood*:

By the waters of Babylon
The willow-trees grow rank:
We hang our harps thereon
Silent upon the bank.
Before us the days are dark,
And dark the days that are gone:
We grope in the very dark
By the waters of Babylon. (St.2)

The last two lines of the third stanza,

¹ *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, IV.3.27. The 'Willow Song' is sung by Desdemona, commencing at line 41: it is a version of *Willow, Willow, Willow*, in *Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. by Ernest Rhys, 2 vols (London: JM Dent, 1906), I, 193-6.

² Surtees Cat. no. 254, plates 379-382. Birmingham Museums and art Gallery. 'I designed and began painting lately a good-sized picture of Desdemona singing the Willow Song while Emilia dresses her hair': DGR to FG Stephens, March 28, 1882.

³ Christina also wrote a sonnet entitled *Under Willows*, dated 27th July 1864, which contains many of the elements likewise present in Rossetti's quartet: it seems not unlikely that he may have drawn some inspiration from this. In turn, Christina later wrote *An Echo from Willow-wood*, c. 1870, inspired by the first line of *Willow-wood III*, 'O ye, all ye that walk in willow-wood'.

Oh how should we forget
By the waters of Babylon?

remind us of the role of memory in *Willow-wood*. This Biblical connection is an important one, for the willows upon which the Israelites hang their harps are a symbol of the Lunar-goddess of Babylon, the deity of their hated captors. She is 'The Whore of Babylon' in Revelations. The harps symbolise universal harmony which the Israelites surrender to the goddess, where in the willows, as in Blake's illustrations of Job, the instruments hang in silence. The Lunar-goddess is the presiding deity of *Willow-wood*.

The connection between the willow-wood and the poet is an ancient and intimate one, as elucidated by Robert Graves:

the willow, or osier, which in Greece was sacred to Hecate, Circe, Hera and Persephone [Proserpine], all Death aspects of the Triple Moon-goddess, and much worshipped by witches. As Culpeper says succinctly in his *Complete Herbal*: 'The Moon owns it.' Its connexion with witches is so strong in Northern Europe that the words 'witch' and 'wicked' are derived from the same ancient word for willow, which also yields 'wicker'.¹ The willow (*helice* in Greek, *salix* in Latin) gave its name to Helicon, the abode of the Nine Muses, orgiastic priestesses of the Moon-goddess. It is likely that Poseidon preceded Apollo as the Leader of the Muses, as he did as guardian of the Delphic Oracle; for a Helicean Grove was still sacred to him in Classical times. The wearing of the willow in the hat as a sign of the rejected lover seems to be originally a charm against the Moon-goddess's jealousy. The willow is sacred to her for many reasons: it is the tree that loves water most, and the Moon-goddess is the giver of dew and moisture generally... A famous Greek picture by Polygnotus at Delphi represented Orpheus as receiving the gift of mystic eloquence by touching willow-trees in a grove of Persephone; compare the injunction in *The Song of the Forest Trees*: 'Burn not the willow, a tree sacred to poets.' The willow is the tree of enchantment and is the fifth tree of the year;

¹ The 'modern' usage of 'wicca' as the name for witchcraft denotes the survival of 'the old religion'.

five (V) was the number sacred to the Roman Moon-goddess Minerva. The month extends from April 15th to May 12th, and May Day, famous for its orgiastic revels and its magic dew, falls in the middle.¹

It is apparent that the willow, being 'a tree sacred to poets', is of some importance. In *Willow-wood*, we are again placed within the sacred grove that we encountered in *Bridal Birth*. The willow establishes that it is a lunar grove. As Love - who is also solar Orpheus - 'touched his lute wherein was audible / The certain secret thing he had to tell', we are reminded not only of the 'secret thing' that is *The Streams Secret*, but we are also taken back to the sestet of Sonnet 9, *Passion and Worship*:

Thy mastering music walks the sunlit sea:
But where wan water trembles in the grove
And the wan moon is all the light thereof,
This harp still makes my name its voluntary.

Here, in other words, within this grove, it is the moon which is the presiding deity. The Orphic Sun of Love, although empowered to summon the Lunar-goddess from the depths of the sacred waters, is nonetheless a guest in her domain, and his power is limited. The Lady of the Willow-wood - the Moon - is she in whose stream Ophelia drowned. This is appropriate, for it is the moon that induces the lunacy that was the cause of Ophelia's death. Thwarted love - that is, the thwarted Moon - causes the madness that ends in death.

Ophelia the lunatic was thus dedicated to the moon. She may almost be seen as a sacrificial victim to thwarted love. It is her neglect by male Solar Love that results in her demise in the Lunar waters. The watery element is sympathetic to her tears, for the willow, symbol of the Goddess as 'Mater Dolorosa', weeps with her into the waters, just as in Desdemona's 'Willow Song', the abandoned lover weeps into the stream. But, then again, it is the Moon-goddess in the form of the willow that causes Ophelia's death, when 'on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds / Clambering to hang, an envious sliver

¹ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp.173-4.

broke', thus plunging her into the 'weeping brook'. But perhaps Ophelia herself is not all she seems, for she returns 'mermaid-like', 'a creature native and indued / Unto that element'. She is portrayed like the water-spirit Undine - in a tale familiar to Rossetti - who, having lived in the world of men, ultimately returns to her own watery world. Ophelia's moment of death is not described, and perhaps, rather than dying, she merely returns, absorbed back into the element from which she came. This is hinted at in Millais' painting by the willow in the background, which is shown as a mature fallen trunk from which new withies are springing in an act of regeneration and revivification. Ophelia is not shown in a state of distress, but rather in a state of rapture similar to that in Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*. As she floats along in Millais' painting, her face appears as the moon reflected in water, her gown like the reflection of clouds in the night sky. It is a truly ambiguous image. It is also uncannily supernatural, for Lizzie's dress also resembles a grave-shroud. Sonnet 53, *Without Her*, provides a similar image:

What of her glass without her? The blank grey
There where the pool is blind of the moon's face.
Her dress without her? The tossed empty space
Of cloud-rack whence the moon has passed away.

In *Downstream*, a poem of betrayed love and suicide, written at Kelmscott in 1871, Rossetti describes the drowning of the jilted lover in similar terms:

The summer river flows
With doubled flight of moons by night
And lillie's deep repose:
With lo! beneath the moon's white stare
A white face not the moon,
With lilies meshed in tangled hair,
On this year's first of June.

In the background of Millais' *Ophelia*, a bush of dog-rose hangs above the floating figure, which reminds us of Laertes description of Ophelia as 'O rose of May!'¹ This Rose of Love is a dying rose. The 'Rose of May' immediately identifies Ophelia with the Love-goddess, whose rites were traditionally celebrated in the May Day fertility rituals. Rossetti's fragment *Fin di Maggio* illustrates this:

Oh! May sits crowned with hawthorn-flower,
And is Love's month, they say;
And Love's the fruit that is ripened best
By ladie's eyes in May.²

It should be noted that the seduction of the girl in *Downstream* took place 'On last year's first of May'. This again returns us to Ophelia's snatch of song which Rossetti borrowed in *An Old Song Ended*. Graves informs us:

This was how the cult of Mary Gypsy [i.e. Egyptian Mary, or Isis, or Aphrodite] came to England, brought through Compostella in Spain by poor pilgrims with palm-branches in their hands, copies of the Apocryphal Gospels in their wallets and Aphrodite's scallop-shells stitched in their caps - the palmers, celebrated in Ophelia's song in *Hamlet*.³

Thus it would seem that Ophelia is herself symbolically the Lunar-goddess in her dying love-aspect. This represents the sacrificial element of the fertility myth, an element which portrays the goddess as Saviour. The dying 'Rose of May' is being transformed into Proserpine who descends into the underworld, to await the time when she will be resurrected again as Spring. This links well with Rossetti's characterisation of Lizzie in this role, and of his characterisation of Jane as the reborn Love-goddess in *Water-Willow*. As has already been shown, this is the theme of Sonnet 37, *The Love Moon*. In *English May*, Rossetti portrays Lizzie, if not as actually dying, then certainly as ill,

¹ *Hamlet*, IV.5.157.

² *Works*, I, 378.

³ *White Goddess*, p.396. Graves explains how this influence resulted in the Troubadour cult of Courtly Love, and how 'Merry England' refers to 'the country most engrossed with Mary-worship'.

calling her 'Maytime's hawthorn tree'.¹ The hawthorn, or may, is used by Rossetti as a symbol of Spring,² the white flowers of the shrub symbolising the first new growth of the Lunar-goddess.³ It is the mythological principle of the death and regeneration of the Lunar Love-goddess to whom *The House of Life* is dedicated.

The promise of this 'new birth' as Spring, symbolised as a transference from the old, dead, love to the new, is exemplified in Sonnet 95, *Life the Beloved*. Here, the life-force itself, Spring, is the universal manifestation of which the earthly beloved is an imperfect embodiment subject to death. In turn, the death of the beloved is symbolised here by the apparent death of Nature in winter but the Rosicrucian symbol of dying Love in the last line (the descent into night / winter / the underworld), insists that love transcends and conquers death, holding the promise of a new birth yet to come:

As thy love's death-bound features never dead
To memory's glass return, but contravene
Frail fugitive days, and alway keep, I ween,
Than all new life a livelier lovelihead:-

So Life herself, thy spirit's friend and love,
Even still as Spring's authentic harbinger
Glow with fresh hours for hope to glorify;
Though pale she lay when in the winter grove

¹ William wrote, 'I regard it as addressed to Miss Siddal....Its date may probably have been 1854': *Works*, I, 521.

² Sharp notes Rossetti's use of 'sprays of fragrant May blossoms, significant of the spring-time of life': *DGR*, p.223-4.

³ Graves, *White Goddess*, pp.174-176, states that the hawthorn month falls from May 13th till June 9th, and that the hawthorn is a tree of ill-luck and 'enforced chastity'. In English mediaeval tradition it is connected with the Mayday revels and the cult of the Goddess as Flora, as the bush comes into blossom at this time. It should be remembered that due to the calendar change of 1752, the present Mayday would previously have been 11 days later. Rossetti, in several sonnets in *The House of Life*, uses the hawthorn as a symbol of Spring. Margaret Baker, *Discovering the Folklore of Plants*, 3rd edn (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1996), p.68, writes: 'The link between may blossom and May Day was inevitably weakened by the calendar changes of 1752, after which hawthorn was seldom in bloom on May Day.' She further notes that both the day and the month are sacred to the White Goddess, and that hawthorn, 'Evoking the first days of summer ... often appears in the wreath of the Green Man, or Jack-in-the-Green, a fertility figure'. 'May' derives from the White Goddess Maia, the mother of Hermes (Mercury, or Thoth). As Maia means 'grandmother', it is obvious that she is the death aspect of the Lunar-goddess. Thus in this symbolism, death and life are the two sides of the same coin, the old giving way for the generation of the new.

Her funeral flowers were snow-flakes shed on her
And the red wings of frost-fire rent the sky.

The stream and the well are the habitat of the Moon-goddess, as is the grove of the Willow-wood. As the poet and Orphic Love look into the depths, the mirrored eyes of Love 'beneath grew hers', reminding us of the last stanza of *An Old Song Ended*. It is the symbolic 'transference' of the dominance of the sun to the power of the moon, or of reason to intuition and emotion. The pool is 'the mirror of Venus'¹ as the moon looks down on it from on high to see herself reflected in lakes and streams. The Lake of Nemi, for example, was known as 'Diana's Mirror'. The image is found in several of Rossetti's poems, such as in Sonnet 20, *Gracious Moonlight*, where he compares his beloved to the moon:

So have I marked Queen Dian, in bright ring
Of cloud above and wave below, take wing
And chase night's gloom, as thou the spirit's grief.

Similarly, in *A Match with the Moon*, 'like a wisp she doubled on my sight / In ponds'.

Lunar self-reflection is the theme of the painting *Lady Lilith*, and the accompanying Sonnet 78, *Body's Beauty*, which stresses the hypnotic power of the moon over men:²

And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

¹ As in Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus*, 1898. Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon.

² As in the legend of Actaeon, which has some similarities with *Willow-wood*. Actaeon observes the naked Moon-goddess Diana bathing in a stream, whereupon she turns him into a stag and he is torn to pieces by his own dogs. One may assume that, as he is hunting deer at the time, this all takes place in a wood, presumably a sacred grove of Diana. His dogs, normally a symbol of fidelity, here symbolise his ungoverned passions which turn on him and tear him apart, as do Rossetti's in these sonnets. This, again, is the death aspect of the goddess, who draws Actaeon to herself through the passions.

The mirror is often understood as a symbol of Vanity, but here the reference seems rather to the intense self-searching introspection of the waters of the psyche. It is the search for the answers to the eternal questions posed by one's own existence and sense of being, for if God (or the Goddess) is to be found in the soul of man, then He (or She), can only be found by looking within - hence the ancient dictum, 'Man, know thyself.'

Although the primary sense of the mirror is here a spiritual one, Rossetti does not deny the supernatural. The drawing forth of the Beloved, whether lover or Goddess, is ultimately an act of magic. Rossetti had long been fascinated by the idea of magic images and conjuration as is shown by the anecdote relating how he came to write the poem *Rose Mary*:

The theme had suggested itself as he watched Lucy Brown...painting a picture of 'the Earl of Surrey regarding the image of his mistress in a magic mirror.' It was just the sort of theme that would have fascinated Gabriel at seventeen, and now, at forty-three, he was no less fascinated by it.¹

Interestingly, in the poem *The Mirror*, Rossetti records an instance of Platonic separation in which the poet fails to locate that part of his soul which is the mirror image of his own 'severed self'. This poem contains the lines, 'Twas but another bubble burst / Upon the curdling draught of life', which are reminiscent of the lines in *Willow-wood I*: 'And as I stooped, her own lips rising there / Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.' Both poems indicate instances of love's failure.

Sonnet 40, *Severed Selves*, treats the same theme, although here, the lovers, despite having found each other - the two parts of the one whole - are divided again by circumstance, thus thwarting Love's ideal. The mirror-image that is the Platonic soul split into two separate identities finds expression in the conjuration of the mirror image in the stream in which the beloved is sought. The act of conjuring up the image of the lost beloved is the soul's way of reaching out for what it does not possess in actuality, as we have seen in Sonnet 96, *Life the Beloved*; 'As thy love's death-bound features never dead / To memory's glass return'. Stanza 33 of *The Streams Secret* duplicates the image in *Willow-wood*:

¹ Doughty, p.476. The magic mirror also plays a part in *Faust*, Part I.

while in thy mirror shown
The twofold image softly lies,
Until we kiss, and each in other's eyes
Is imaged all alone.

The same motif is expressed again in Sonnet 12, *The Lover's Walk*, though here the lovers are together:

Still glades; and meeting faces scarcely fann'd: -
An osier-odoured stream that draws the skies
Deep to its heart; and mirrored eyes in eyes ...

While this sonnet captures a brief moment of sunlit joy, as did the painting *Water-willow*, in the poem *Love's Nocturn* Rossetti duplicates the dark images of *Willow-wood*: 'Deep within the August woods', 'there in rings / Whirl the foam-bewildered springs', 'From polluted coverts nigh, / Miserable phantoms sigh', 'Meeting mine own image there / Face to face', 'Water's voice and wind's as one',

Suddenly her face is there:
So do mounting vapours wreath
Subtle-scented transports where
The black firwood sets its teeth.
Part the boughs and look beneath, -
Lilies share
Secret waters there, and breathe.

The 'black firwood' (cf. Dante's 'dark forest'), is a place of dark magic that in *A Young Fir-Wood* is ambiguously described as a 'fellowship of wands', a phrase redolent of a brotherhood of magicians. And in Sonnet 97, *A Superscription*, the supernatural again lies behind the reflected image:

Unto thine eyes the glass, where that is seen
Which had Life's form and Love's, but by my spell
Is now a shaken shadow intolerable,
Of ultimate things unuttered the frail screen.

Dark woods, magic mirrors, conjuration, and the supernatural, are all part of the fabric of *Willow-wood*. The Lunar Willow-wood is, in its darkest manifestation, a witch-wood ruled over by Proserpine. Through the well flows the stream of oracular and prophetic waters which seep from the deep dark bowels of the earth and in them is contained the hidden, occult knowledge that is the 'stream's secret'.

In Sonnet 67, *The Landmark*, the poet profanes the sacred well:

What, - the foolish well
Whose wave, low down, I did not stoop to drink,
But sat and flung the pebbles from its brink
In sport to send its imaged skies pell-mell,
(And mine own image, had I noted well!)

And as a result of his profanity, his 'path is missed' and he must return through the darkness in order to find his right way. In such symbolism, the mirror image in the pool is that of heavenly perfection; above, this perfection is sublime and absolute, but as it is imaged in the water, symbol of materiality, it is imperfect. By desecrating the pool, the poet fractures not only the divine image, but also, as a consequence, his 'own image', which is a reflection of the divine.

Another source for the imagery is to be found in *Paradise*, where Dante is transported to the Heaven of the Moon, and observes faces appearing from below the waters:

As from transparent glasses polished clean,
Or water shining smooth up to its rim,
Yet not so that the bottom is unseen,
Our faces' lineaments return so dim

That pearl upon white forehead not more slow
 Would on our pupils its pale image limn;
 So I beheld faces that seemed aglow
 To speak, and fell into the counter-snare
 From what made love 'twixt man and pool to grow.
 No sooner had I marked those faces there,
 Than, thinking them reflections, with swift eyes
 I turned about to see of whom they were,
 And saw nothing.¹

Doughty correctly arrives at the conclusion that Rossetti's beloved (Jane) is a lunar symbol, and briefly adds, 'The moon-image suggests the sun-metaphor for Rossetti himself that follows, the sun dying in splendour'.² Doughty is quite correct in his deduction; the poet is indeed symbolically the sun. He stands as Apollo to Jane's Proserpine.³ Here in *Willow-wood*, the poet and Orphic Solar Love sit upon the well of the Lunar waters. The mirror-image of Love is the Beloved, and as Love is the Sun, so the Beloved is Lunar. Here the Platonic reflection applies; the lovers are the two parts of the divided whole. Whereas earlier we saw how the poet sought this reflection of his divided self in the eyes of the beloved, or failing that, in her conjured image, here we understand that this has a higher spiritual model in the solar and lunar archetypes. An example may be found in Sonnet 26, *Mid-rapture*;

what gaze

To thine, which now absorbs within its sphere
 My worshipping face, till I am mirrored there
 Light-circled in a heaven of deep-drawn rays?

And also in Sonnet 57, *True Woman II: Her Love*;

¹ Canto III.10.

² Doughty, p.552. cf. also fn.1, p.538. This is a significant image that will concern us in later chapters. Doughty adds that it is an 'inapt image', considering Rossetti's suicidal tendencies.

³ I have earlier shown this to be the case in Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*.

She loves him; for her infinite soul is Love,
And he her lodestar. Passion in her is
A glass facing his fire, where the bright bliss
Is mirrored, and the heat returned.

In *Willow-wood*, the lunar beloved is summoned from the depths of the pool for the embrace of 'the soul-wrung implacable close kiss'. This is the mirror-imaging of the sun and moon as they combine in the 'sacred marriage' of the archetypal union of opposites. As the poet and love lean over the pool of Willow-wood, we are reminded of the passage from Ficino's *Pimander*:

Nature smiled with love, for she had seen the features of that marvellously beautiful form of Man reflected in the water and his shadow on the earth. And he, having seen this form like to himself in Nature, reflected in the water, he loved her and wished to dwell with her. The moment he wished this he accomplished it and came to inhabit the irrational form. Then Nature having received her loved one, embraced him, and they were united, for they burned with love.¹

Another possible and important source for this imagery is Bruno, who uses the mythological metaphor of Actaeon:

he lets loose the greyhounds and the mastiffs upon the track of savage beasts, that is, the intellectual kinds of ideal conceptions, which are occult, followed by few, visited but rarely, and which do not disclose themselves to all those who seek them. Here, amongst the waters, - that is, in the mirror of similitude, in those works where shines the brightness of divine goodness and splendour, which works are symbolized by the waters superior and inferior, which are above and below the firmament, he sees the most beautiful bust and face - that is,

¹ France Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p.24.

external power and operation, which it is possible to see, by the habit and act of contemplation and the application of mortal or divine mind, of man or any god.¹

It should be remembered that in the Hermetic Tradition, Nature is entirely Lunar, being an expression of the waters of materiality.

This absorption of the 'one' in the 'other' that is at the same time the 'self', is well expressed in Sonnet 6, *The Kiss*:

What smouldering senses in death's sick delay
Or seizure of malign vicissitude
Can rob this body of honour, or denude
This soul of wedding-raiment worn to-day?
For lo! even now my lady's lips did play
With these my lips such consonant interlude
As laurelled Orpheus longed for when he wooed
The half-drawn hungering face with that last lay.

I was a child beneath her touch, - a man
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she, -
A spirit when her spirit looked through me, -
A god when all our life-breath met to fan
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity.

This is the culmination of the spiritual quest, when man is transformed into a god through the ultimate experience of love. Love's ardours are transformed into the sacred Rosicrucian fire that transmutes man into deity. And as the man becomes transformed into a god, we understand that he was a god all along, and that, through the sacred fire of love, he has burnt away the shell of his materiality. In *Willow-wood*, this moment is shown in a significant Rosicrucian image; as Love sings, the lovers cling together 'as meeting rose and rose'. As the love-union subsides, it is symbolised by the sinking sun

¹ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 91-2.

at 'the end of day'. The glowing 'heart-stain' is both within and without, the pain that succeeds a symbolic union of man and nature, soul and body, God (the sun), and Creation (the moon). As the 'heart-stain' spreads, the petals ('leaves') of the rose 'drop loosened' as the lips of the lovers part, and the song of Love ceases.

A similar image is to be found in *The Song of the Bower*, in which the poet's heart is likewise symbolised by a flower:

There it must droop like a shower-beaten flower,
Red at the rent core and dark with the rain.
Ah! yet what shelter is shed above it, -
What waters still image its leaves torn apart?
Thy soul is the shade that clings round it to love it,
And tears are its mirror deep down in thy heart.

As the lips of the lovers part and the embrace ends, the lovers slip apart like the petals falling from the roses. In a moment of tragic poignancy,

her face fell back drowned, and was as grey
As its grey eyes; and if it ever may
Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.

This is the moment that the poet lets go the shade of his dead wife: she slips back to be reclaimed by the materiality of the grave (the 'grove'?) after her brief exhumation from Tartarus. In his grief:

I know that I leaned low and drank
A long draught from the water where she sank,
Her breath and all her tears and all her soul.¹

¹ Compare stanza 37 of *The Stream's Secret*:

But there Love's self doth stand,
And with Life's weary wings far-flown,
And with Death's eyes that make the water moan,
Gathers the water in his hand:
And they that drink know nought of sky or land
But only love alone.

Here he drinks of the waters of forgetfulness, just as Dante drank from the waters of Lethe in the Earthly Paradise:

On this side it streams virtue such as takes
 Soilure of sin out of the memory;
 On the other, memory of good deeds awakes.
 On this side, Lethe, the other, Eunoe
 Its name is; nor comes healing from this well
 Unless upon both sides it tasted be.¹

The streams of Lethe and Eunoe flow through the ‘divine forest’ atop Mount Purgatory. This is the counterpart of the ‘dark forest’ that is also the Willow-wood. As in the coin imagery of the introductory sonnet to *The House of Life*, with its dark and light sides, so these two woods, the dark one ruled by Proserpine, and the other governed by her bright counterpart, Spring, supply a similar balance. It is in the Earthly Paradise that Dante encounters Matilda, whom he recognises as the Spring aspect of Proserpine:

Thou putt'st me in remembrance of what thing
 Proserpine was, and where, when by mischance
 Her mother lost her, and she lost the spring.²

Dante is next presented with the mystical vision in which he beholds Beatrice, to whom he has to make confession of his sins. She commands him,

O thou who art yon-side the sacred stream

 Answer, for in thee the sad memories
 By the water are not yet discomfited.³

Note the Life, Love, and Death motif again present here.

¹ *Purg.* XXVIII.127.

² *Purg.* XXVIII.49.

³ *Purg.* XXXI.1,11.

In this canto Beatrice chastises Dante for his inconstancy to her memory, and Rossetti's association of Beatrice with Lizzie must have suggested uncomfortable personal resonances for him:

Hear how my buried body should have spurred
And on the opposite path have furthered thee.
Nature or art never to thee assured
Such pleasure as the fair limbs that did house
My spirit, and now are scattered and interred.
And if the highest pleasure failed thee thus
By my death, at such time what mortal thing
Ought to have drawn thee toward it amorous?
Truly oughtest thou at the first arrow's sting
Of those lures, to rise after me on high,
Who was no more made in such fashioning.
Nay, nor should girl or other vanity
Of such brief usage have thy wings down-weighed.¹

The 'nettle of penitence' causes Dante to faint, and when he recovers, he finds himself up to the neck in the waters of Lethe, which Matilda causes him to swallow. He is thus purged, and able to confront Beatrice, who then unveils the symbolic beauties of her mouth and eyes to him.

This is an important episode of transference, for it is both the acknowledgement of guilt and the washing away of the sin that caused it. Dante is now free of the past and able to move forward spiritually, reunited with the 'new' Beatrice. It is the same for Rossetti as he drinks of the waters of forgetfulness. Yet at the same time he is also drinking in the waters of the Moon-goddess symbolised by Jane. This ambiguous action is the precise moment of Transference when he finally lets go of the memory of his dead wife and consummates his passion - spiritually at least - with the lunar Jane, drinking in 'Her breath and all her tears and all her soul'. With it comes a 'new life', the 'new

¹ *Purg.* XXXI.47.

birthday' for which the souls of *Willow-wood* II had been so long waiting, as described in stanza 11 of *The Portrait*:

How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,
When, by the new birth borne abroad
Throughout the music of the suns,
It enters in her soul at once
And knows the silence there for God.

And so *Willow-wood* IV culminates in this merging of man and deity:

And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,
Till both our heads were in his aureole.

This repeats the climax of Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*, 'when Death's nuptial change / Leaves us for light the halo of his [Love's] hair.'

The image of the deity Love merging with the poet derives from the *Vita Nuova*, when Love appears and delivers his message to Dante by 'a river which was clear and rapid': 'And when he had spoken thus, all my imagining was gone suddenly, for it seemed to me that Love became a part of myself'. This is recapitulated in the last image of *Willow-wood* IV.

This passage in the *Vita Nuova* is relevant to the theme of *Willow-wood*, because Love's message to Dante concerns the transference of his love (albeit 'feigned'), from a departed lady to another whom Love identifies:

He appeared to me troubled, and looked always on the ground; saving only that sometimes his eyes were turned towards a river which was clear and rapid, and which flowed along the path I was taking. And then I thought that Love called me and said to me these words: 'I come from that lady who was so long thy surety; for the matter of whose return, I know that it may not be. Wherefore I have taken that heart which I made thee leave with her, and do bear it unto

another lady, who, as she was, shall be thy surety,' (and when he named her I knew her well).¹

This reiterates the theme behind 'the Lady of Pity'.

My interpretation of the *Willow-wood* cycle can be summarised as follows: the beloved of the poet is lunar; we are introduced to her as the dying Rose of May; she passes into the black phase of Proserpine who is queen of the Willow-wood; her shade is conjured from the mirror of the lunar waters by magic; the union of the sacred marriage of the sun and moon takes place; the shade slips back into the waters; the poet drinks the waters of forgetfulness during which transference takes place from his loyalty to the old dead moon to the new rising moon; the poet is conjoined with the Solar-god. The poet and his beloved are the earthly manifestations of the heavenly archetypes of the Sun and Moon. It is essentially the same story as told by Dante, although expressed in quite different terms. Just as the Beatrice of the *Divine Comedy* is not that of the *Vita Nuova*, so a more drastic change takes place between Rossetti's Lunar-queens: she is literally reborn with a new identity. In contrast to the translation of Dante's beloved from earth to heaven, it should be noted that, although Rossetti's beloved is symbolically Lunar, she remains an entirely earthly entity. Rather than placing his love in heaven and retaining her identity, Rossetti's love remains earth-bound in a transference of his love from 'Beatrice' to 'The Lady of Pity', from Lizzie to Jane, the 'Two very voices of [Love's] summoning bell'.

I have to conclude that while Doughty believes that these sonnets declare the 'mutual admission of a long-suppressed passion', this is no more (at this point in time) than tentatively the case. The kiss may be a kiss of farewell to Lizzie, just as at the same time it is a kiss of acknowledgement to - or rather, from, - Jane, but after it she slips away again back to Tartarus. Love's 'moan of pity and grace' indicates that this is not a moment of celebration. One day has ended, but the next has not begun: the poet remains in the Willow-wood, at least for the time being, to await the return of Spring to the world. That Spring has been engendered by the union of the sacred marriage, but for the time being, the poet must remain in darkness with his hopes for the return of 'loves hour'. This is the 'severance' of *Willow-wood*.

¹ *Works*, II, 40.

The Influence of Poe on *Willow-wood*.

A strong influence with which Rossetti was familiar is the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe. Poe's poem *Ulalume* contains strikingly similar imagery to the *Willow-wood* quartet. It relates the anniversary of the dead beloved:

It was down by the dank tarn of Auber,
In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir. (St.1)

Here once, through an alley Titanic,
Of cypress, I roamed with my Soul -
Of cypress, with Psyche, my soul.¹

In stanza 4, in symbolism similar to the pre-dawn imagery of *The Stream's Secret*, Poe describes Astarte's star-rise in terms that anticipate Rossetti's later painting of this goddess. She is depicted as the Lunar-goddess of the dead, rising through 'the house of Leo'.² Psyche warns against Astarte's star, but the poet puts his trust in its light which leads them to the sepulchre of the dead beloved.

Rossetti produced an illustration for this poem in 1847-8.³ He also produced drawings for *The Raven*, and *The Sleeper*.⁴ The latter poem is replete with Rossettian imagery: 'At midnight, in the month of June, / I stand beneath the mystic moon', the influence of which, from 'the quiet mountain top, / Steals drowsily and musically / Into the universal valley', where, Platonically, 'All Beauty sleeps'. In a strange nocturnal landscape, with its lake, trees, and mists, 'the dim sheeted ghosts go by'. The beloved, pallid, long-haired, and strangely dressed, sleeps, while 'in the forest, dim and old', the tomb awaits. The description of the vault reminds us of the monument of *The Sonnet*: 'Triumphant, o'er the crested palls, / Of her grand family funerals - / Some sepulchre, remote, alone'.

In *To Helen*, we find similar imagery in a moonlit and enchanted rose-garden:

¹ *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Bell & Hyman, 1979), p.23.

² C.f. WMR's explanation of the phrase 'the House of Life', noted earlier. Poe's lines, 'She rolls through an ether of sighs - / She revels in a region of sighs' also anticipate Rossetti's image of the underworld in Sonnet 3, *Love's Testament*: 'when the whole / Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal / And weary water of the place of sighs'.

³ Surtees Cat no. 30, plate 16. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

⁴ Surtees Cat no. 19, plates 5, 6, and 7; and Cat. no. 29, plate 15, respectively.

Clad all in white, upon a violet bank
I saw thee half-reclining; while the moon
Fell upon the upturn'd faces of the roses,
And on thine own, upturn'd - alas, in sorrow!

Here the poet beholds 'only the divine light in thine eyes - / Save but the soul in thine uplifted eyes'; he sees 'but them - saw only them for hours - / Saw only them until the moon went down':

But now, at length, dear Dian sank from sight,
Into a western couch of thunder-cloud;
And thou, a ghost, amid the entombing trees
Didst glide away. *Only thine eyes remained.*

(Poe's italics)

The poem concludes with Rossettian Neoplatonic imagery, in which the poet declares that it is his 'duty, *to be saved*' by the light the eyes contain, which fill his 'soul with Beauty (which is Hope)'. The final two lines affirm: 'I see them still - two sweetly scintillant / Venuses, unextinguished by the sun!'

In *Dreamland*, we are again transported to the willow-wood:

By the lakes that thus outspread
Their lone waters, lone and dead, -
Their sad waters, sad and chilly
With the snows of the lolling lily, -
By the mountains - near the river
Murmuring lowly, murmuring ever, -
By the grey woods, - by the swamp
Where the toad and the newt encamp, -
By the dismal tarns and pools
Where dwell the Ghouls, -

By each spot the most unholy -
In each nook most melancholy, -
There the traveller meets aghast
Sheeted Memories of the Past -
Shrouded forms that start and sigh
As they pass the wanderer by -
White-robed forms of friends long given,
In agony, to the Earth - and Heaven. (St.2)

Similar imagery is again present in *To One in Paradise*: the beloved has been borne away over the sea, leaving the lover alone in a place 'Where weeps the silver willow!'. The penultimate stanza reiterates Rossetti's statement that *Willow-wood* 'describes a dream or trance of divided love':

And all my days are trances
And all my nightly dreams
And where thy dark eye glances,
And where thy footstep gleams -
In what ethereal dances,
By what eternal streams!

In *To the River*, we find imagery that recalls the summoning of the beloved from the water in *Willow-wood*:

But when within thy wave she looks -
Which glistens then, and trembles -
Why, then, the prettiest of brooks
Her worshipper resembles;
For in his heart, as in thy stream,
Her image deeply lies -
His heart which trembles at the beam
Of her soul-searching eyes. (St.2)

Besides the inherent similarity of symbolism and concentration on Neoplatonic themes, what we find in Poe more than any other poet Rossetti might have read is the stress on the soul as an independent entity, and the use of a disembodied and supernatural landscape to convey mood. Poe's environment is that of dream, vision, and trance, and this provides a powerful prototype for Rossetti. This might perhaps be termed 'dreamscape' or a 'landscape of the soul'. Rossetti does not copy Poe, but his themes, to a certain extent, run parallel. From the examples I have quoted, it is possible to reconstruct certain details of the *Willow-wood* quartet. It is as if Rossetti had walked the same mental landscape as Poe.

CHAPTER 4

LOVE'S TESTAMENT: ROSSETTI'S RELIGION OF LOVE.

The earlier version of this sonnet, originally published in 1870, and entitled *Love's Redemption*, differs importantly from the later version in the symbolism of the octave. William notes: 'The peculiarity of this sonnet consists in its application of religious or Christian symbols to the passion of love.'¹ The octave of the original version runs as follows:

O Thou who at Love's hour ecstatically
Unto my lips dost evermore present
The body and blood of Love in sacrament;
Whom I have neared and felt thy breath to be
The inmost incense of his sanctuary;
Who without speech hast owned him, and intent
Upon his will, thy life with mine hast blent,
And murmured o'er the cup, Remember me! -

The later version has significant alterations to lines 2,3, and 8, which read respectively:

Unto my heart dost evermore present,
Clothed with his fire, thy heart his testament;

And murmured, 'I am thine, thou'rt one with me!'

In the earlier version, with its clear reference to the Eucharist, - the 'sacrament'² of line 3 - it is worth noting Rossetti's substitution of 'Love' for Christ. William Sharp

¹ *Designer and Writer*, p.186.

² Rossetti's choice of this word alone is typical: 'the Lord's Supper specially: a symbol of something spiritual or secret: a sign, token, or pledge of a covenant: a religious mystery': *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*.

wrote of this sonnet: 'the imagery of Sacramental communion was made to symbolise the giving up of one's life to another in love'.¹ Hall Caine similarly stated: 'That certain lines in Rossetti's love sonnets contained phrases that for the better part of two thousand years have been sacred to the highest mysteries of religion must not be denied...'² In line eight, the words 'Remember me!' are borrowed from the penitent thief's plea to Christ at the crucifixion: 'Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise'.³ The entire frame of reference is Biblical, as is suggested by the word 'testament' in the title. The union of lovers - 'thy life with mine hast blent' - is equated with the faithful's union with Christ through the consumption of his body and blood.⁴ Rossetti's intention is to establish the poet's union with the beloved on the same spiritual level as the Christian's union with God. Rossetti is in fact symbolising the Platonic surrender of the self to Love through the medium of the beloved, and the confusion arises because he has used a Christian context as his vehicle. His method is one entirely familiar to the syncretic practises of the Renaissance Neoplatonists, though not to his nineteenth century reading public. Here the symbolism is at best unhappy and the poet risks being misinterpreted.

The later version avoids this danger by removing the Biblical reference. The substituted lines, 'Unto my heart dost evermore present, / Clothed with his fire, thy heart his testament', return to the symbolic motifs of the mediaeval and Renaissance worlds, and the emphasis from the purely Christian to the universal and syncretic. Although the image of the blazing heart is common in Catholic iconography, it is also a familiar attribute of Venus in alchemical prints. Perhaps its best known occurrence is in the *Vita Nuova*, where Dante relates his vision of Love:

for there appeared to be in my room a mist of the colour of fire, within the which
I discerned the figure of a lord of terrible aspect to such as should gaze upon
him, but who seemed therewithal to rejoice inwardly that it was a marvel to see.

¹ DGR, p.417.

² *Recollections of Rossetti*, p.54.

³ Luke, 23.42-3.

⁴ 'This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you': Luke 22.20. The cup through which the Eucharist is celebrated is the Chalice of the Grail which provides a potent symbol within Rossetti's art. This is examined in detail in the section on Arthur and the Holy Grail.

Speaking he said many things, among the which I could understand but few; and of these, this: *Ego dominus tuus* ['I am thy master']. In his arms it seemed to me that a person was sleeping, covered only with a blood coloured cloth; upon whom looking very attentively, I knew that it was the lady of the salutation who had deigned the day before to salute me. And he who held her held also in his hand a thing that was burning in flames; and he said to me, *Vide cor tuum* ['Behold thy heart']. But when he had remained with me a little while, I thought that he set himself to awaken her that slept; after the which he made her to eat that thing which flamed in his hand; and she ate as one fearing.¹

The blazing heart is a symbol of love's desire, but it also symbolises the heart blazing with the fire of sacred love, and as such, it burns with a spiritual flame. In Dante's passage, the vision is imbued with a ritualistic significance, so that it assumes the status of a pagan Eucharist. Similar symbolic imagery is found in these lines by Giordano Benivieni, who is obviously influenced by Dante:

Her words, her lovely face such virtue hold,
That who sees one and who the other hears
Makes pure his heart as flame-refined gold
And gets wings to mount the heavenly spheres.²

In his sonnet, Rossetti is echoing Dante and the later Neoplatonists in making Love, rather than Christ, his master, and the figure of the beloved, rather than the Eucharist, the means of his salvation. The final line, now changed to 'I am thine, thou'rt one with me!', also exchanges the former promise of a Christian Paradise for a Platonic union of souls.

¹ *Works*, II, 32-3.

² Robb, pp.131-2.

Of the imagery of the sestet, William wrote: 'the later part of it shadows forth by analogy the descent of Christ into hell, and his releasing thence the spirits predestined to salvation':¹

when the whole
Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal
And weary water of the place of sighs,
And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!

Rossetti's imagery here seems to draw its inspiration from this passage of Plato's *Phaedo*:

We do not perceive that we live in the hollows, but think we live on the upper surface of the earth, just as if someone who lives in the depths of the ocean should think he lives on the surface of the sea, and, seeing the sun and the stars through the water, should think the sea was the sky, and should, by reason of sluggishness and feebleness, never have reached the surface of the sea, and should never have seen, by rising and lifting his head out of the sea into our upper world ... how much purer and fairer it is than the world he lived in.²

A similar link with Biblical lore is the word 'shoal', which Rossetti may have derived from the Hebrew *She'ol*, the name of the underworld.³ Here, the expulsion of breath in the sigh symbolises two things: firstly, a state of longing for the loss of the thing most desired; and secondly, the release of the soul in death. Once again, we are presented with the symbol of descent into the underworld. Of the trinity referred to at the start of the sestet, it is the beloved who operates as the intermediary, the 'grace', between Love and the poet. As such, she fulfils the same role as does Beatrice for Dante. It is she

¹ *Designer and Writer*, p.186.

² Quoted by Gombrich, *Icones Symbolicae*, in *Symbolic Images*, p.146.

³ Graves has an interesting note: 'Gabriel...ran errands for Sheol (the Hebrew Hecate) and was sent to summon souls to Judgement': *White Goddess*, p.151. On p. 268, he also notes that the Guardian of Sheol ('the uninhabitable parts of the world'), was the Goddess of the Sea. In *Greek Myths*, 2nd edn (London: Cassel, 1958), p.95, he adds that Persephone (Proserpine) equates with Sheol as Death-goddess. The Biblical 'Hell' is a mistranslation of 'She'ol'.

who descends the 'deep stair' to 'work deliverance', and 'Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!' The allusion is not principally of the Harrowing of Hell, but to the descent of Platonic Beauty into the realm of materiality, the 'weary water' of matter, in which the soul of the poet is imprisoned, following directly from the preceding sonnet, *Bridal Birth*, in which 'Love lay / Quickening in darkness'.

The words 'deep stair' are worth closer investigation. The idea of the 'deep' immediately reminds us of the imagery of *The Blessed Damozel*:

It was the rampart of God's house
That she was standing on;
By God built over the sheer depth
That which is Space begun;
So high, that looking downward thence
She scarce could see the sun.

It lies in Heaven, across the flood
Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
With flame and darkness ridge
The void, as low as where this earth
Spins like a fretful midge.¹

(Stanzas 5-6)

Stanza 11 contains the lines: 'Strove not her steps to reach my side / Down all the echoing stair?'.² The water-imagery corresponds to that in the sestet of *Loves Testament*.³ If we add to this that the Blessed Damozel not only represents Platonic

¹ This imagery is also to be found in *Paradiso*, XXII, where Beatrice bids Dante to look back through the heavenly spheres to the earth: 'My sight through each and all of the seven spheres / Turned back; and seeing this globe there manifest, / I smiled to see how sorry it appears': line 133.

² Christina's poem *Dreamland* contains a similar image of descent which is partly Platonic and partly mythological in that it symbolically equates the experience of the writer with that of Proserpine or Eurydice. The water imagery is a significant motif. *Dreamland* appeared in the first edition of *The Germ*; *The Blessed Damozel* in the second.

³ Stanza 9 of *Love's Nocturn* also contains similar imagery:

Ah! might I, by thy good grace
Groping in the windy stair,
(Darkness and the breath of space
Like loud waters everywhere,)

Beauty but is also the Lunar-goddess gazing down on her waters below in which her image is reflected, we have a motif that is replicated throughout Rossetti's verse.¹

The vision of the Platonic descent of Beauty to rescue the soul is particularly well illustrated in Burne-Jones' painting, *The Golden Stairs*,² which seems closely related to the last two lines of Rossetti's sonnet; 'And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes / Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!' Interestingly, Burne-Jones' painting draws its central image, the descending spiral, from Blake's painting, *Jacob's Dream*, in which angels ascend and descend between the figure of the sleeping Jacob in the earthly material realm, and the mythological, Platonic, and Rosicrucian image of God as the Sun.³ We may also equate the 'deep stair' with the planetary spheres of mediaeval cosmology. In the *Divine Comedy*, these are nine in number in each of the three realms of Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. Alternatively, one could interpret them as being the four levels of Platonic existence based on the Pythagorean Tetractys.⁴ Ficino tells how Platonic Beauty descends through these levels from the mind of God:

And so it is that the same divine countenance shines, as it were, from three mirrors - the Angelic Mind, the Soul of the World, and the Body of the World. In the first, being nearest to God, it is brilliant; in the second it is not so clear; and in the third, which is far removed, it is obscure.⁵

In the *Symposium*, Diotima uses step-imagery to explain to Socrates how beauty saves the soul of man:

Meeting mine own image there
Face to face,
Send it from that place to her!

¹ If Rossetti's *Blessed Damsel* draws inspiration from Dante's Beatrice, she in turn draws upon Boethius's Sophia, Lady Philosophy, who wears the emblem of a ladder on her dress. Dante was familiar with Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*. A representation of this figure, known as 'Philosophy', or 'Alchemy', appears on the central portal of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris.

² Tate Gallery.

³ The spiral stairway depicted in both these paintings is also an element within Masonic symbolism.

⁴ Mediaeval cathedrals embodied this Platonic concept: nave = material world and the physical body (elemental world); choir = psyche, or soul (celestial world); sanctuary = spirit (intellectual world); tabernacle = divinity (archetypal world). Thus there were four spiritual steps to the Godhead. These four steps are seen in Rossetti's *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, in which she is depicted mounting towards Christ.

⁵ John Vyvyan, *Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty*, p.41.

And the true order of going or being led by another to the things of love, is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which he mounts upwards for the sake of that other beauty, going from one to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair actions, and from fair actions to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is. ...to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.¹

Castiglione, in *Il Cortigiano*, details the seven steps of the Neoplatonic ascent, stating, 'the lover shall find another yet farre greater, in case hee will take this love for a stayre (as it were) to climbe up to another farre higher than it.'²

The idea of the fall and resurrection of the soul is the major theme of *Phaedrus*. At the end of Socrates' dialogue on love, he tells us that

For those who have once begun the heavenward pilgrimage may not go down again to darkness and the journey beneath the earth, but they live in light always; happy companions in their pilgrimage, and when the time comes at which they receive their wings they have the same plumage because of their love.³

This gaining of wings is the conclusion of Sonnet 21, *Love Sweetness*:

The confident heart's still fervour: the swift beat
And soft subsidence of the spirit's wing,
Then when it feels, in cloud-girt wayfaring,
The breath of kindred plumes against its feet.⁴

¹ Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus*, ed. by Candace Ward, trans. Benjamin Howett (New York: Dover, 1993), pp.33-4.

² Vyvyan, p.54.

³ *Phaedrus*, p.70.

⁴ Compare these lines by Bruno:

Since I have spread my wings to my desire,
The more I feel the air beneath my feet,
So much the more towards the wind I bend
My swiftest pinions,
And spurn the world and up towards heaven I go.

Heroic Enthusiasts, 1, 85.

The clouds here symbolise the opacity of vision that separates man from sight of God. They represent the light of higher beauties, 'seen but through a glass dimly'.¹ They are 'the cloud of unknowing' which the soul seeks to pierce. Rossetti's imagery in this passage is entirely traditional, and is taken directly from Plato, where the image of the loss and regaining of the wings of the soul plays an important part in this process:

The wing is intended to soar aloft and carry that which gravitates downwards into the upper region, which is the dwelling of the gods; and this is that element of the body which is most akin to the divine. Now the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and the like; and by these the wing of the soul is nourished, and grows apace.²

The soul that seeks not the divine is doomed to sink into a prison of materiality, although 'the soul which has seen most of truth shall come to the birth as a philosopher, or artist, or musician, or lover'.³

However, some souls retain the recollection of their former existence in God's company. In clinging to heavenly memories, 'the mind of the philosopher alone has wings', 'being initiated into perfect mysteries'.⁴ Because his focus is solely on divine things, 'the vulgar deem him mad, and rebuke him; they do not see that he is inspired'.⁵

In the *Symposium*, Orpheus is condemned because he 'did not dare die for love', whereas Ficino states that there are two resurrections in a reciprocal love where the lover dies to himself; firstly because his love is returned, and secondly because the beloved has taken him into her soul where he again finds himself. In a sense, a state resembling immortality is achieved, for 'beloved mortals survive their death because they live "entombed" in the hearts of their lovers'.⁶ The lover and the beloved see themselves reflected in the mirror of the other's soul; 'the lover is his mirror in whom he is

¹ Ibid, p.65.

² Ibid, p.62.

³ Ibid, p.63.

⁴ Ibid, p.64.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Edgar Wind, *Pagan mysteries of the Renaissance*, p.136.

beholding himself', as Plato tells us.¹ This is the theme of the octave of Sonnet 4, *Lovesight*, the last line of which concludes with 'my soul only sees thy soul its own'.

Rossetti returns to the theme of death and resurrection through love in a trinity of sonnets: Sonnet 48, *Death in Love*, Sonnet 41, *Through Death to Love*, and Sonnet 36, *Life in Love*, although, curiously, they are placed in reversed order numerically in the sequence.

Sonnet 48, *Death in Love* is one of Rossetti's highly allegorical studies. As William notes;

The title, Death-in-Love, must serve as our guide. It intimates that Earthly Love partakes of the nature of Death. Death dominates and concludes Earthly Love; Love is the thrall of mortality.²

In the second half of the octave, Rossetti presents us with an intriguing image which conflates birth with Spring, 'Bewildering sounds, such as Spring wakens to', signifying that through death we experience a new birth into the eternal Spring of the paradisaical state. Lorenzo de Medici, who began his own sonnet-sequence with one on death, explains:

He that examines these matters more closely, will find that the beginning of the *vita amorosa* proceeds from death, because whoever lives for love, first dies to everything else. And if love has in it a certain perfection,it is impossible to arrive at that perfection without first dying with regard to the more imperfect things. This very rule was followed by Homer, Virgil and Dante: for Homer sent Ulysses into the Underworld, Virgil sent Aeneas, and Dante made himself wander through the Inferno, to show that the way to perfection is by this road.³

¹ *Phaedrus*, p.69. This is well illustrated in Rossetti's poem *The Mirror*.

² *Designer and Writer*, p.215. There is an echo of this in Sonnet 88, *Hero's Lamp*, with its funerary symbolism and references to the extinction of sacred fire: 'While 'neath no sunrise, by the Avernian Lake, / Lo where Love walks, Death's pallid neophyte.'

³ Wind, p.133. Wind adds: 'And because Orpheus did not really die, he was 'debarred from the perfection of felicity', and unable to regain Eurydice.' Dante did not die when he 'made himself wander through the Inferno'.

For the Renaissance mind, as for Rossetti, the God of Love was also the God of Death: 'A god of pain and sadness he remained, but no persistent terror could be attached to Death if he appeared in the image of Amor'.¹ *Death In Love*, concludes, "I and this Love are one, and I am Death." The two-fold nature of Love - which was a common motif of the Renaissance Petrarchist poets - is a feature of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, 'where the precious diction is an extreme instance of the bitter-sweet style in literature'.² Rossetti was well acquainted with this book.³ This conjunction of Love and Death is, as we shall see, a persistent motif in Rossetti's sonnets, the first example occurring in 'Death's nuptial change' in *Bridal Birth*.

Wind argues that the motif of Love-as-Death derived from Roman sarcophagi: 'As the myths appeared to them in a sepulchral setting, it was only natural, and perhaps legitimate, to inquire into their secret meaning, and to read them not as simple tales but as allusions to the mysteries of death and after-life, conceived in Neoplatonic terms.'⁴

To die was to be loved by a god, and partake through him of eternal bliss. 'As there are many kinds of death,' a Renaissance humanist [Valeriano] explained engagingly, 'this one is the most highly approved and commended both by the sages of antiquity and by the authority of the Bible: when those ... yearning for God and desiring to be conjoined with him (which cannot be achieved in this prison of the flesh) are carried away to heaven and freed from the body by a death which is the profoundest sleep; in which manner Paul desired to die when he said: I long to be dissolved and be with Christ. This kind of death was named the kiss by the symbolic theologians [the *mors osculi* of the Cabbalists, for which Pico claimed to have found a parallel also among the Chaldeans], of which Solomon also appears to have spoken when he said in the Song of Songs:

¹ Ibid, p.135.

² Ibid, p.136.

³ WMR, in *Letters and Memoir*, I, 62, records a copy among their father's books, which DGR 'inspected from time to time, with some gusto not intermingled with awe - each book being pronounced by our father to be a "*libro sommamente mistico*" [book in the highest degree mystical]'. The book was well known among Rossetti's circle: Dunn (*Recollections of DGR*, p.17) records that Rossetti owned a copy; William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, 2 vols (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1892), II, 285-8, discusses the identity of the engraver of its illustrations; Burne-Jones owned a copy, and based his own style of woodcut designs for Morris's volumes on its illustrations.

⁴ Op. cit., p.129.

Osculetur me osculo oris sui. And this was foreshadowed in the figure of Endymion, whom Diana kissed as he had fallen into the profoundest sleep....¹
(Wind's editorial parentheses.)

This is the theme that I identified in the sestet of *Bridal Birth*. Giordano Bruno also refers to 'the death of the soul, which by the Kabbalists is called the death by kisses'.² Rossetti's sonnets and paintings of *Lady Lilith (Body's Beauty)* and *Sibylla Palmifera (Soul's Beauty)*, are both replete with these symbols of the kiss, sleep, and death.³ The funerary symbolism is more fully explained by Pico della Mirandola's words in *Commento* III, viii:

Through the first death, which is only a detachment of the soul from the body, ... the lover may see the beloved celestial Venus ... and by reflecting on her divine image, nourish his purified eyes with joy; but if he would possess her more closely ... he must die the second death by which he is completely severed from the body ... And observe that the most perfect and intimate union the lover can have with the celestial beloved is called the union of the kiss ... and because the learned Cabbalists declare that many of the ancient fathers died in such a spiritual rapture, you will find that, according to them, they died ... the death of the kiss ... This is what our divine Solomon desired ... in the Song of Songs ... This Plato signified by the kisses of his Agathon.⁴

In Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*, 'union and copulation with God Most High' is a rapture perfected in death: 'as they reached the limit of life, the soul in the embrace of God would abandon the body altogether, remaining in supreme bliss, conjoined with the Godhead.'⁵

Wind hints at the element of sacred ritual that I have earlier indicated:

¹ Ibid, p.130-1.

² *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 96. He goes on to state that this is symbolised in the Song of Solomon and the Psalms. Sleep is another form of such a death, because, as in the effects of love, the bonds of the material prison are weakened: 'The soul is said to be faint, because it is dead in itself, and alive in the object.'

³ The symbolism of these two paintings is discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

⁴ Wind, p.131, n.2.

⁵ Ibid, n.3.

Although based on the fantastic assumption that Hebrew sources could be used to elucidate the pagan mysteries of love, the inference drawn in these arguments from the *mors osculi* of the Cabbala comes remarkably close to a modern opinion that the pagan mysteries culminated in a *hieros gamos*, an ecstatic union with the god which was experienced by the neophyte as an initiation into death.¹

This indeed performs a central function in all ancient and, presumably, modern mystery cults, including Freemasonry.

Ecstasy as the sacred bedfellow of death is a theme touched on by Shelley in *Rosalind and Helen*:

Heard'st thou not, that those who die (1123)
Awake in a world of ecstasy?
That love, when limbs are interwoven,
And sleep, when the night of life is cloven,
And thought, to the worlds dim boundaries clinging,
And music, when one beloved is singing,
Is death?²

This theme is important both in Rossetti's work and the sources from which he appears to be drawing. A fine example of Love as the God of Death is to be found in the two versions of Rossetti's painting *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*, 1856 and 1871³ (Fig.6), in which Love is unequivocally shown delivering the *mors osculi*. *Beata Beatrix*, likewise depicts the rapture of sacred union at the moment of death. Another example of a fatal kiss is in the two versions of the painting *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini*, 1855 and 1862,⁴ although in this case, it leads not to union with a god, but places the participants in the second circle of Hell:

¹ Ibid, p.132.

² *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Harry Buxton Forman, 4 vols (London: Reeves and Turner, 1876-7), I, 351.

³ Surtees Cat. nos. 81 and 81B, R.1, plates 95 and 97. Tate Gallery and Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, respectively.

⁴ Surtees Cat. nos. 75 and 75E, R.1, plates 87 and 88. Tate Gallery and Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford, respectively.

When we read how that smile, so thirsted for,
Was kissed by such a lover, he that may
Never from me be separated more
All trembling kissed my mouth.¹

At which point they are murdered by Francesca's husband. Hearing this tale, Dante's 'whole life fled / For pity out of me, as if I died; / And I fell, like a body falling dead', thus symbolically emulating their experience.²

In Sonnet 41, *Through Death to Love*, the octave concludes with an image of the underworld of 'the dim shoal' of *Love's Testament*:

Even such, within some glass dimmed by our breath,
Our hearts discern wild images of Death,
Shadows and shoals that edge eternity.

At this point, Rossetti rescues the lover from this subterranean state by firmly establishing Love's superiority over Death:

Howbeit athwart Death's imminent shade doth soar
One Power, than flow of stream or flight of dove
Sweeter to glide around, to brood above.
Tell me, my heart, - what angel-greeted door
Or threshold of wing-winnowed threshing floor³
Hath guest fire-fledged as thine, whose lord is Love?

The references to sacred fire and the 'wind-winnowed threshing floor' are from the baptism of Christ, when John the Baptist predicts;

¹ *Inferno*, V.133.

² V.140. Dante's whole journey may be seen as a symbolic death through his love for Beatrice.

³ This is also partly derived from 'The small round floor' of the earth, in *Paradiso*, XXII.151.

he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.¹

Here again, Rossetti is conflating the figures of Christ and Love.

In Sonnet 36, *Life in Love*, Rossetti concludes this symbolic trinity of sonnets with the beloved restoring life to the lover:

Not in thy body is thy life at all,
But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes;
Through these she yields thee life that vivifies
What else were sorrow's servant and death's thrall.
Look on thyself without her, and recall
The waste remembrance and forlorn surmise
That lived but in a dead-drawn breath of sighs
O'er vanished hours and hours eventual.

The wasteland from which the lover is delivered by the beloved is that of the Willow-wood. It illustrates the intimate interweaving of Rossetti's own personal experience and his religious allegories.

All these correspondences demonstrate the syncretic method of Rossetti's verse. While *Love's Testament* is unusual in Rossetti's use of Christian symbolism as its vehicle, behind it there lies still a wealth of connected ideas which constitute Rossetti's 'Universal Religion' founded on mystical Platonism.

Sonnet 5, *Heart's Hope*, begins with imagery directly related to that of the sestet of Sonnet 3:

By what word's power, the key of paths untrod,
Shall I the difficult deeps of Love explore,
Till parted waves of Song yield up the shore,
Even as that sea which Israel crossed dryshod?

¹ Matthew 3.11-12.

The combination of the 'word' and the 'deeps' refers us to Genesis 1.2; 'And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters', and St John 1.1; 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' However, the 'word of power' is something which manifests itself in many religious, magical, and occult systems, including Freemasonry.¹ Francis Yates notes; 'the prime matter of Paracelsus, the basis of his alchemical thought, is related to the conception of the Logos, or the Word, as found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and also to Cabalistic interpretations of the Word.'² The connections between universal vibrations, the Mosaic tradition, and the Rosicrucians, are explored more fully in the section on Sonnet 79, *The Monochord*. Here, Rossetti asks which 'word of power' is the key that will open up the door to hidden paths of Love in a question that owes less to accepted Biblical lore, than it does to occultism.³ The 'difficult deeps of Love', through the allusion to the 'parted waves' and 'Israelites', indicate Rosicrucian symbolism. In Exodus 14.21-2, Moses parts the waters for the Israelites, not by the use of a 'word of power', but by stretching his hand over the sea; 'and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground'. This descent into the sea seems to equate with the Platonic descent into the 'dim shoal' of *Love's Testament*. For Rossetti, his entry into the sea of Love appears to threaten great danger - presumably in the light of his own personal situation with Morris's wife - against which he is protected by the magical sanction of the God, Love.⁴ Thus, the nature of the 'word' appears to be revealed in the first line of the sestet, which invokes a trinity: 'Yea, in God's name, and Love's, and thine'. This demonstrates an intimate link that exists between this sonnet, *Hearts Hope*, and the last sonnet in the sequence, *The One Hope*, the last two lines of which run; 'But only the one Hope's one name be there, - / Not less nor more, but even that word alone.' This, it seems, is the enigmatic key to the whole sequence. The name of the beloved acting as a sacred charm or talisman occurs again in the conclusion of Sonnet 31, *Her Gifts*, in which the Beloved is the Goddess; 'Breathe low her name, my soul; for

¹ The 'Horseman's Word' and the 'Mason's Word', for example.

² *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.150. She adds that many of Paracelsus's theories of medicine and magic were derived from the teachings of Ficino.

³ Gombrich notes that 'The magic sign "represents" in the literal sense of the word. Like the name it gives not only insight but power': *Icones Symbolicae*, in *Symbolic Images*, p172.

⁴ As I have earlier indicated in the section on the *Willow-wood* sonnets.

that means more.’ In a Biblical as well as a magical Cabbalistic sense, it is the Name of God which is the ‘word of power’; here, however, Rossetti gently transfers this to the name of the Beloved. Behind this figure of the beloved as woman stands the figure of the Beloved as Goddess, a theme I shall explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

As in the last line of the octave of Sonnet 4, *Lovesight*, ‘my soul only sees thy soul its own’, the poet continues the theme of Platonic reunion in *Heart’s Hope*: ‘Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor / Thee from myself, neither our love from God.’ It is important to note that in this Rossetti is significantly adding the conjunction of body and soul to that of the Platonic union of soul and God to form a new and original trinity. Neither Plato nor the Neoplatonists would have approved of this innovation, seeking, as they did, to separate the soul from the physical body in which it was ‘prisoned’. On a more universal level, this concept stands for the reconciliation and redemption of the entire physical world (the world body), with its creator (God), through the power of spiritual love (in the union, - or rather, - reunion of souls). Thus, as the lover stands in relation to beloved, so the whole of mankind stands in relation to the Godhead, with love as the intermediary and catalyst of the process of transmutation. In the same way, the whole material world, the Earthly Paradise, is restored to its rightful place in the cosmos as Paradise Regained, a process known as *apocatastasis*. This spiritual recovery of Eden was one of the primary Rosicrucian aims. Within the recovered Eden, man and woman would also be restored to their rightful place as Adam and Eve before the Fall, reunited with God. It is through the exploration of ‘the difficult deeps of Love’ in a religious sense, that the chosen people are rescued from exile in the material realm, and returned to the Promised Land of a spiritual Eden. This also explains the significance of the words ‘Remember me!’ with which Rossetti ends the octave of *Loves Testament*, with their oblique reference to Christ’s reply: ‘Today thou shalt be with me in paradise’. In a truly syncretic manner may be added to this the words in *Symposium* which relate to the restoration of man’s original and true state:

I believe that if all of us obtained our love, and each one had his particular beloved, thus returning to his original nature, then our race would be happy. ... Therefore we shall do well to praise the god Love, who is the author of this gift, and who is also our greatest benefactor, leading us in this life back to our own

nature, and giving us high hopes for the future, that if we are pious, he will restore us to our original state, and heal us and make us happy and blessed.¹

In the sestet of *Heart's Hope*, Rossetti, invokes the sacred names of the trinity of God, Love, and the beloved in order to 'Draw from one loving heart such evidence / As to all hearts all things shall signify'. I take this to mean that in the minute examination of the nature of love within himself, Rossetti is attempting to arrive at a single universal truth which will satisfy all such searches in others. In elevating love to the status of a religion, Rossetti is seeking to arrive at a religion in which all forms of love can be found, and in which they can co-exist in peace. Thus love is established as the fundamental essence from which all religions proceed. This is the core of Rossetti's universal pantheism.

This, he tells us in Rosicrucian sun-imagery, is a new dawn; 'Tender as dawn's first hill-fire'.² For emphasis, he doubles the metaphor, comparing it with 'Spring's birth hour'.³ This is the precise transitional moment when mankind stands on the threshold between day and night, between winter and the 'new life' of a Spring that is the sum 'of other Springs gone by.' By this is intended the arrival of the perpetual Spring of Paradise which will never fade:

Here is the year no longer in fourfold seasons divided,
Here is eternal Spring; for no clouds darken the aether,
No rain moistens the skies, the fleet-foot hares, and the fallow
Deer and the timid sparrows in flowery meadows delighting
Forsake their fears.

Ugolino di V. Verino, *Paradisus*.⁴

¹ P.18.

² This is repeated in Sonnet 26, *Mid-rapture*; 'our love-world's new sunrise, / Shed very dawn'. Compare with Swinburne's *Songs Before Sunrise*, of which William Bell Scott said: 'you know you are hailing in the new time hopefully; you are assisting the advent of the brighter day; you are writing *Songs Before Sunrise*'. Swinburne replied: 'I was in hopes you meant the glory of my hair, that used to be so splendid, you know!': Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, II, 212. The later Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn adopted this Rosicrucian symbol in its title.

³ This is minutely detailed in Botticelli's *Primavera*, in which the 'intense ... instantaneous penetrating sense' is the precise moment of *conception* itself, the 'Bewildering sounds, such as Spring wakens to'.

⁴ Robb, p.290.

There comes nor hoar frost light nor chilling snow
 To dim the eternal garden's locks to white.
 Therein the frozen Winter dare not go,
 That grass, those trees, no blasts unfriendly blight.
 There the revolving years no changes show
 Since joyous Spring takes never hence her flight,
 But loosens her bright hair upon the winds
 And myriad blossoms into garlands binds.

Angelo Poliziano, *Stanze per la Giostra*.¹

Thus revivifying Spring stands as a pagan equivalent to the restoration of mankind to the primal Garden of Eden. Here, the 'fall' of Biblical man and the Platonic soul appear to coincide. This is indeed the case in the *Divine Comedy*, where Dante, having passed through the purging fire at the top of Mount Purgatory, is restored to the Earthly Paradise.² Thus Spring and the new 'universal religion' of love are conflated; both consist of the sum of all their predecessors, such 'As to all hearts all things shall signify'. This is Rossetti's 'heart's hope'.

In Sonnet 6, *The Kiss*, the personal translation of this process, as it takes part in the individual, is detailed. This is the wedding-day of the soul operating on a spiritual level that the material earthly calamities of the first four lines of the octave are unable to affect. Rossetti's allusion to Orpheus relates to the mythic version of the Platonic and Christian descent of the Godhead to recover lost souls in *Love's Testament*. Where Orpheus failed, his modern counterpart succeeds, and the union of souls is symbolised by the motif of the kiss.

For Rossetti, the kiss is an important motif. In his paintings of the watercolour period, in which mediaevalism is predominant, the theme of lovers embracing in a shared kiss produced some of his most beautiful images. The theme of courtly love plays a role in his painting that is not far removed from the idealisation of love that governs his poetry. In his later art, this is usually replaced by images of the single female only, and

¹ Ibid, p.125.

² *Purg.* XXVIII.37-51.

the role of the lover is then adopted by the viewer standing before the picture. If they provoke in the viewer a sense of rapture in the face of beauty, then the Platonic ideal within them has been realised. The 'Cult of Beauty' will have succeeded. Rossetti identifies himself as a priest of the Cult of Beauty when he writes in Sonnet 10, *The Portrait*: 'Her face is made her shrine. ... They that would look on her must come to me.' The religious phraseology and the idea of the beloved as a 'shrine' is extended in Sonnet 4, *Lovesight*:

When do I see thee most, beloved one?
When in the light the spirits of mine eyes
Before thy face, their altar, solemnise
The worship of that Love through thee made known?

Here, beauty, in the form of the beloved, replaces the image of Christ as the object of worship. It is beauty which is the salvation of the lover, for as the beloved gazes on him, 'he receives the effluence of beauty through the eyes':¹

But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense. For sight is the keenest of our bodily senses.²

One might also compare the last lines of *Love's Testament*, 'as thine eyes / Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!', with the last line of the octave of *Lovesight*, 'And my soul sees only thy soul its own'. This theme of the beloved drawing the lover to her through the power of her eyes is derived directly from Dante. In this passage from the *Vita Nuova*, she is functioning as Ideal Beauty:

Love saith concerning her: ...

'Forsure,

¹ *Phaedrus*, p.65.

² *Ibid.* This is Dante's Beatrice, and the figure of all the beloveds following her pattern.

This is a creature of God till now unknown.¹
She hath that paleness of the pearl that's fit
In a fair woman, so much and not more;
She is as high as Nature's skill can soar;
Beauty is tried by her comparison.
Whatever her sweet eyes are turned upon,
Spirits of love do issue thence in flame,
Which through their eyes who then may look on them
Pierce to the heart's deep chamber every one.
And in her smile Love's image you may see;
Whence none can gaze upon her steadfastly.¹

In his commentary, Dante adds, 'I speak of the eyes, which are the beginning of love; ... I speak of the mouth, which is the end of love.'² Both the eyes and mouth are familiar motifs in Rossetti's verse also. Although Dante never receives anything beyond a salutation from the lips of Beatrice, this greeting operates with all the force of the 'word's power'. In other words, what proceeds from her lips is magical and effects Dante's spiritual transmutation. It will also be noted that from her eyes, 'Spirits of love do issue thence in flame' to 'Pierce to the heart's deep chamber'. This refers to the Platonic descent of *Love's Testament*, in which the inner man stands as a model of the outer world. This is also a common motif with the Neoplatonist poets such as Bruno:

Through the eyes enters my deity, and through seeing
Is born, lives, is nourished, and has eternal reign;
Shows forth what heaven holds, earth and hell.³

The process of Love operating through the eyes in the form of spirits of flame illustrates the Platonic distaste for the pleasures of the physical body which it regarded as animalistic and base: physical love belongs to the hot blood and the natural inclinations

¹ *Works*, II, 55-6.

² *Ibid*, 57.

³ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 50.

of youth - 'Evil is the vulgar lover who loves the body rather than the soul'.¹ It is a function of the lower Aphrodite, whose concern is with material generation. Spiritual love, which is 'the love of the noble mind, which is in union with the unchangeable, [and] is everlasting',² can only be achieved through wisdom and virtue.

The kiss performs the same metaphorical role as the conjoining of eyes, as is explained by Baldassare Castiglione in *Il Cortigiano*:

the rational lover knows that, though the mouth is indeed part of the body, none the less it is through it that we give egress to words, which are the interpreters of the soul, and to that indwelling breath that is called soul also; and for this cause he delights to unite his mouth in a kiss with that of the beloved lady, not in order to provoke in himself any lewd desire, but because he feels that that union opens up a passage for their souls which, drawn by desire for one another, diffuse themselves each into the other's body, and so mingle together that each has two souls, and a single soul, thus composed of two, sustains, as it were, two bodies; whence a kiss may be called a union of souls rather than of bodies, since it has such power over the soul that it draws it forth and separates it from the body ... and therefore the divinely enamoured Plato says that in kissing his soul came to his lips that it might go forth from the body.³

And through the kiss the soul 'thinketh herself to be in Paradise'.⁴

An illustration of this is to be found in Sonnet 45, *Secret Parting*:

Her tremulous kisses faltered at love's gate
And her eyes dreamed against a distant goal:
.
And as she kissed, her mouth became her soul.

¹ *Symposium*, p.11.

² *Ibid.*

³ Robb, p.207. Bruno, in *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 160-1, draws the comparison between breath and spiritual aspiration: sighing for love is equated with aspiring for the higher infinite, and a longing for death in the desired object. Divine aspiration (breath as soul) is symbolised by the winds (such as the fertilising winds in Botticelli's *Primavera*, and God as the divine wind in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling).

⁴ Vyvyan, p.53.

All these themes - the kiss, the voice and the gaze of the beloved, the word, and the mirroring of souls - are brought to a culmination in Sonnet 26, *Mid-rapture*. It will be noted that the phrasing of the first and last lines owes something to *The Song of Solomon*.

Thou lovely and beloved, thou my love;
Whose kiss seems still the first; whose summoning eyes,
Even now, as for our love-world's new sunrise,
Shed very dawn; whose voice, attuned above
All modulation of the deep-bowered dove,
Is like a hand laid softly on the soul;
Whose hand is like a sweet voice to control
Those worn tired brows it hath the keeping of: -

What word can answer to thy word, - what gaze
To thine, which now absorbs within its sphere
My worshipping face, till I am mirrored there
Light-circled in a heaven of deep-drawn rays?
What clasp, what kiss mine inmost heart can prove,
O lovely and beloved, O my love?

This is taken a step further in the sestet of Sonnet 6:

I was a child beneath her touch, - a man
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she, -
A spirit when her spirit looked through me, -
A god when all our life-breath met to fan
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity.

This may be compared with Bruno's 'And I by help of love, / From an inferior thing, do change me to a god'.¹

The Kiss here fulfils a vital symbolic role in uniting the lover with the Godhead, but it also contains undertones of Love as the God of Death: for true union can only be achieved through Death, as we have seen in Sonnet 3. It is the sacrifice of the self to the Godhead who is the true Beloved, and who claims the lover with a kiss. This is symbolically expressed in Sonnet 7, *Supreme Surrender*, the title of which expresses the surrender of the self through love.² The earthly lover and beloved thus stand, as it were, as a surrogate for their heavenly counterparts. It is thus significant that the passage on the kiss quoted from Castiglione forms the first of the seven steps of the heavenward path.³

Rossetti's 'Fire within fire, desire in deity' expresses a theme that would be instantly recognisable to the Renaissance mind. Giordano Benivieni, after conversion by Savonarola, converted his Platonic love poetry into poems of Christian devotion. Here, in lines strongly resembling Rossetti's, he uses the same symbolism:

But foolish he who sees these blessings all
Forth-flashing from Thy uncreated fire
And doth not seek it, love, fear and desire.⁴

Michelangelo expresses a similar sentiment in Sonnet 92, which is probably addressed to Vittoria Colonna:⁵

Inseparably close, as heat to fire,
To timeless beauty that has power to raise,

¹ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 87.

² It is obvious that Rossetti understands the mythological significance here, as the octave of the sonnet contains harvest references which relate to the rituals of the corn-goddess who governs the agricultural year through the sacraments of sacred marriage and death.

³ It sometimes seems a thinly drawn line between the Platonic 'Cult of Beauty' and what may be described as a 'Cult of Death'. While the Platonic and Neoplatonic view was essentially one of union through rapture, there would inevitably be those who placed an extreme and perhaps undue emphasis on the surrender of the self. It is clear from his verse that Rossetti well understood the intimate connections between rapture and death; *Beata Beatrix* being a good visual example of this.

⁴ Robb, p. 132.

⁵ The first line of this sonnet, 'Not in my heart does my love's life abide' bears a strong similarity to the first line of Rossetti's *Life in Love*; 'Not in thy body is thy life at all'.

Fit souls to heaven, cleaves my whole desire
And since thou hast all heaven in thy gaze
I refuge take beneath thy brows, and burn
There where I loved thee first to make return.¹

Castiglione, in the sixth stage of Platonic ascent, tells us,

Thus the soule kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love...being
chaunged into an Angell, she understandeth all things that may be understood:
and without any veil or cloud, she seeth the maine sea of the pure heavenly
beautie and receiveth it into her, and enjoyeth the sovereraigne happinesse, that
can not be comprehended of the senses.²

Bruno states that Love is symbolised by fire because the active element of fire converts the thing consumed into itself: thus it stands as a metaphor for the consumption of the lover by the divine Godhead.³

The Neoplatonic belief in the veiled divinity of man, propounded by Ficino - 'Know thyself, divine race clothed with a mortal garment!'⁴ - is expounded by Cornelius Agrippa in *De occulta philosophia*: 'As for the fourth *furor*, coming from Venus, it turns and transmutes the spirit of man into a god by the ardour of love, and renders him entirely like God, as the true image of God.'⁵ He quotes Hermes statement that man's nature partakes of both that of God and demons, but that man is 'Changed into God by love':

For man is the image of God, at least he who by the furor of Venus has been made like to God and lives only in the *mens*.....The Hebrew and Cabalist doctors say that the soul of man is the light of God, created in the image of the Word, first pattern of the cause of causes, substance of God, marked with a seal of which the character is the eternal Word. Having understood this, Hermes

¹ Robb, p.26-9.

² Vyvyan, p.57. Again, this is another example of Rossetti's 'instantaneous penetrating sense'.

³ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 44.

⁴ Ibid, p.35. This the opening sentence of his famous *Letter to the Human Race*.

⁵ Yates, pp.281-2.

Trismegistus said that man is of such a kind that he is higher than the inhabitants of heaven, or at least possessing with them an equal fate.¹

Bruno likewise states: 'I by help of love, / From an inferior thing, do change me to a god',² and, 'He (the enthusiast) becomes a god by intellectual contact with the divine object'.³ For the Neoplatonic magician this transmutation of man into god was through the practice of 'erotic magic'. For Ficino, Love, the fountain head was no less than a Magus, as he tell us in his commentary on the *Symposium*.⁴ 'Why is Love called a Magus?' he asks:

Because all the force of Magic consists in Love. The work of Magic is a certain drawing of one thing to another by natural similitude. The parts of this world, like members of one animal, depend all on one Love, and are connected together by natural communion ... From this community of relationship is born the communal Love: from which Love is born the common drawing together: and this is the true magic.⁵

Yates adds, 'the point at which erotic magic might become participation in divine love, or at which the Magus might appear robed in supercelestial light and love, is not easy to distinguish'.⁶

In all these quotations, we are able to observe the syncretic characteristics inherent in this type of symbolism and Rossetti's close adherence to type. Although they derive from one tradition, they range from the nominally Christian Platonism of Ficino, Benivieni, and Michelangelo, to the overtly occult Hermetic Platonism of Agrippa. We are also able to observe the use of the symbol of sacred fire that would later form an essential identifiable characteristic of Rosicrucian imagery.

In *Nuptial Sleep*, the sonnet that was to be the cause of so much pain to Rossetti, the fire of the poet's passion is not restricted to Plato's chaste kiss:

¹ Ibid.

² *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 87.

³ Ibid, I, 71.

⁴ In which Diotima describes Love as 'a philosopher at all times, terrible as an enchanter, sorcerer, sophist': p.27.

⁵ Yates, p.127.

⁶ Ibid.

At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:
And as the last slow sudden drops are shed
From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.

This recalls the storm in *The Portrait*, and here represents the aftermath and subsidence of love's *furor*. For Rossetti, the elevation of man to god is achieved through the transcendence of physical passion. This is the means by which the small spark of fire in man is whipped up to equal the great fire of the deity, as is exemplified in the quotation from Castiglione earlier. The full significance of this sacred fire is more fully explored in the section on *The Monochord*. It is interesting to note that Rossetti uses both water and fire as symbols of passion, and this reminds us of the words of John the Baptist; 'I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire'.¹ While water symbolises human emotional passion, fire symbolises the higher unquenchable passion of the spirit.

We return to the subject of the kiss in Sonnet 94, *Michelangelo's Kiss*, in which,

with sorrowing love and reverence meek,
He stooped o'er sweet Colonna's dying bed,
His Muse and dominant Lady, spirit wed, -
Her hand he kissed, but not her brow or cheek.

Here it might seem that Michelangelo's love was imperfect, in that it lacked the passion, commitment, and the true force to achieve its goal, but in fact it represents Michelangelo's emphasis on the spiritual value of love, and his complete denial of physical passion. Robb says of Michelangelo's sonnets that 'the love of which they are fundamentally the expression is the love of the beauty, remote, limitless, and

¹ Matthew, 3.11. This passage, with its references to baptisms of water and fire, no doubt held a special appeal, not least to the Rosicrucians. Verse 12 continues with symbolisms found in Son. 41, and possibly an oblique reference in Son. 81.

unattainable, in which Michelangelo the mystic was fain to lose himself',¹ and that Michelangelo's was 'a loving veneration that exalted Vittoria both before and after her death into "a thing enskyed and sainted"'.² It is, in Rossetti's presentation of the subject, as if Michelangelo were approaching his deity, so deep is his respect for her. It is the kiss of a courtier to his queen, whose brow or cheek he would not presume to kiss.

But sweet is love in blameless heart conceived
That fails not for the outward form's decline
Or death, but here gives pledge of life divine.

Michelangelo, Sonnet 109.³

The motif of the kiss is an important one, because the union it signifies counters the state of severance that would otherwise exist. Separation is overcome and the psychic wound of the fall, temporarily at least, is healed. This is why physical union and the exchange of individual souls restores the separation of the individual (in the form of two 'severed selves'), from God. What is restored on a lower level is likewise restored to God on a higher level. A large proportion of Rossetti's poetry is an exploration of the twin themes of separation and restoration.

The theme of severance is vitally important in Rossetti's verse. In the previous chapter on the *Willow-wood* sonnets, I quoted Sonnet 40, *Severed Selves*, as representing the separation of the lovers in their earthly existence. While it is true that this sonnet portrays the misery of the lover separated from, and longing for the beloved, it also represents on a more sublime level an important element of the Platonic tradition. In the *Symposium*, Plato relates how man came to be divided. Zeus, enraged because man had attempted to scale heaven and attack the gods, declared: 'I have a notion that will humble their pride and mend their manners; they shall continue to exist, but I will cut them in two and they will be diminished in strength and increased in numbers', whereupon he 'cut them in two, like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling'. Thus

¹ Robb, p.225.

² Ibid, p.246, n.2. It was through Vittoria Colonna that Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano* was brought to publication in 1528.

³ Ibid, p.262. This sonnet was in fact addressed to Cavalieri, but it should be remembered that Michelangelo's love poetry was entirely Platonic, and took little account of the sex of the subject.

humanity was literally and physically 'severed' from its other half, as symbolically illustrated by Lorenzo de Medici in *Selve d'Amore*:

By Fortune am I parted now and torn
From her fair face and from such dear delights;
Nought else on earth I prize and nought implore
But that one form of which I hear no more.¹

There are two important aspects of this act. Firstly it corresponds to the Biblical account of how Eve was physically separated from the fabric of Adam; the two were once one. Secondly, as a punishment for man's pride in his attempt to become as the gods in heaven, it corresponds to his fall from Paradise. Thus an important syncretic element exists in these mythical accounts. Lorenzo pleads:

To those dear haunts in that departed time
Oh Love, restore me with my lady fair,
In those unsullied years, that tender prime,
Of neither jealousy nor hope aware.
Let not our days to ripe fulfilment climb
But let our love become eternal there.
No other fire in us, nor other grace
In her; but only that sweet time and place.²

The Platonic 'severance' of man is indeed a state of fall, and represents not only exile from the other half, but also exile from God. Thus, in those examples of Rossetti's verse (such as *Heart's Hope*) which treat of the union of the lover with the beloved, and their union with God, he seeks to redress this lamentable situation. 'After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and threw their arms about one another eager to grow into one ... so ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing

¹ Ibid, p.129.

² Ibid.

the state of man',¹ and, 'the desire and the pursuit of the whole is called love'.² This desire to find union, not only with the beloved, but with God also is exemplified in the many quotations we have been examining. This union would survive the death as 'one departed soul instead of two'.³ This finds full expression in stanza 17 of *The Blessed Damozel*:

(Alas! we two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?)

Thus, in truth, if the right partner is found, we love not another, but ourselves: 'And my soul only sees thy soul its own'.

Interestingly, in Sonnet 16, *A Day of Love*, Rossetti provides us with a complete reversal of Lorenzo de Medici's poem quoted earlier, and it is worth comparing the two. In this sonnet, the Earthly Paradise has been temporarily regained:

Those envied places which do know her well,
And are so scornful of this lonely place,
Even now for once are emptied of her grace:
Nowhere but here she is: and while Love's spell
From his predominant presence doth compel
All alien hours, an outworn populace,
The hours of Love fill full the echoing space
With sweet confederate music favourable.

Now many memories make solicitous
The delicate love-lines of her mouth, till, lit

¹ *Symposium*, pp.16-7.

² *Ibid*, p.18.

³ *Ibid*.

With quivering fire, the words take wing from it;
As here between our kisses we sit thus
Speaking of things remembered, and so sit
Speechless while things forgotten call to us.

The memories of 'things forgotten [which] call to us' are those of the Heavenly Paradise, from which the beloved, like Beatrice, has descended. The inherent sadness of this sonnet leads us to believe that hers is but a brief visit in this instance. The title, indeed, informs us that this is only 'a day of love', not an eternity.

Plato has this sequence: union in God; separation in exile; recognition in exile; reunion in God. The Renaissance mind saw this cycle symbolised in the image of the Three Graces. Rossetti plays with this sequence, adding the fatal twist that, having recognised each other in exile, the lovers are prevented by fate from reuniting, and are thus condemned to remain in exile. This is the state of the Willow-wood. Thus, if the poet-lover remains in this state, unrescued by the descent of divine beauty, or prevented from being uplifted through union with the beloved, the path to perfection becomes the path of the solitary recluse who is no longer lifted directly on the wings of rapturous love, but who must labour towards his goal through the practice of spiritual techniques. An excellent example of this 'life thwarted' love is found in Sonnet 54, *Love's Fatality*:

Sweet Love, - but oh! most dread Desire of Love
Life-thwarted. Linked in gyves I saw them stand,
Love shackled with Vain-longing, hand to hand:
And one was eyed as the blue vault above:
But hope tempestuous like a fire-cloud hove
I' the other's gaze, even as in his whose wand
Vainly all night with spell-wrought power has spann'd
The unyielding caves of some deep treasure-trove.

Also his lips, two writhen flakes of flame,
Made moan: 'Alas O Love, thus leashed with me!

Wing-footed thou, wing-shouldered, once born free:
And I, thy cowering self, in chains grown tame, -
Bound to thy body and soul, named with thy name, -
Life's iron heart, even Love's Fatality.'

This is another of Rossetti's richly allegorical tableaux. The split-personality of Love, reminiscent of the poet's divided Self in Sonnet 98, *He and I*, represents the deity Love that is present in man, but who in this instance is unable to raise him because of his insistence on clinging to a lower, earthly love, and as a consequence he remains trapped in a material existence, 'Bound to thy body and soul, named with thy name'.¹ The metal chains ('gyves'), corresponding to 'Life's iron heart', represent the dreadful prisoning weight of matter to one who 'eyed as the blue vault above', longs to return to the weightlessness of an aerial existence. But he remains bound to one whose gaze is denied light within 'The unyielding caves' of the underworld. Rescuing Love (the Christ / Sun-god / Platonic Beauty) of *Love's Testament* has here failed in his quest, and is himself trapped in the 'place of sighs'.

In Sonnet 15, *The Birth Bond*, we are presented with another example of pure Platonism which is closely allied to Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*. It would be fair to say that this pair of sonnets themselves stand as birth-partners, as they present two aspects of the same theme. There exists, however, a hint of something besides Platonism in the symbolism of this sonnet, which it is worth disentangling. The first four lines of the octave tells us that the children of the 'birth-bond' 'were born of a first marriage-bed', 'And nursed on the forgotten breast and knee'. The environment where this takes place is, symbolically, heaven. Thus the children of the 'birth-bond' are the product of the sacred union between the heavenly King and Queen. But what has become of the Mother-queen? We are not told. We are only informed that the children (who are the souls of the earthly lovers), were 'nursed on the forgotten breast and knee'. Proceeding, we note that now only the father remains, and that he has had other children to whom the soul-children are half-brother and sister, though there is no indication of a

¹ The imagery of *Love's Fatality* bears a remarkable similarity to Card 15 of the Major Arcana of the Tarot, entitled 'The Devil'. In this card, 'The Lovers' (Card 6) stand shackled to and by the illusion of materiality. Dante pictures the Devil as an angel fallen from the realm of divine beauty, and entrapped in matter (frozen water, the ultimate symbol of immobilisation).

replacement mother-presence. The displaced mother, whom I interpret to be the ancient Mother-goddess, (whose symbol is the pelican nurturing her children from the red blood of her breast, - 'the forgotten breast'), is the deity of an earlier and superseded religion. Now, the father, whom I take to be the Judaic Father-god of Christianity, reigns and engenders his other children alone. In the second four lines of the octave, we are told that the original pair of souls 'to their father's children they shall be / In act and thought of one goodwill'; that is, they exist happily alongside those adherents of the new religion. But they have between themselves 'in silence speech, / And in a word complete community'. The 'silent speech' could be interpreted as the language of secret doctrine of the 'complete community', in both senses of the latter word. This 'complete community' is based 'in a word'. We are again brought back to the significance of 'the word' ('By what word's power'), of *Heart's Hope*.

The sestet moves on from this point to the time when the birth-souls now occupy the human bodies of the lover and his beloved:

Even so, when first I saw you, seemed it, love,
That among souls allied to mine was yet
One nearer kindred than life hinted of.
O born with me somewhere that men forget,
And though in years of sight and sound unmet,
Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!

Precisely the same theme is to be found in Spenser's *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*:

For love is a celestiall harmonie
Of likely harts composed of starres concent,
Which ioyne together in sweete sympathie,
To work each others ioye and true content,
Which they have harbourd since their first descent
Out of their heavenly bowres, where they did see
And knew ech other here beloved to bee.¹

¹ Vyvyan, pp.12-13.

It is at this point that the recognition of the lovers takes place, as detailed in *Bridal Birth*; 'Even so my Lady stood at gaze and smiled'. This moment of recognition is detailed again in the poem *Sudden Light*, the title of which suggests the 'instantaneous penetrating sense' of *Heart's Hope*:

I have been here before,
But when or how I cannot tell:
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.
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.
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You have been mine before, -
How long ago I may not know:
But just when at that swallow's soar
Your neck turned so,
Some veil did fall, - I knew it all of yore.

It is evident that Rossetti's 'religion of love' belongs within the Platonic tradition. In view of his father's intensive study of the subject, it is not surprising that he had a peculiar insight into its mysteries. One of the distinguishing features of this tradition, particularly that of Renaissance Neoplatonism, was its delight in syncretism. Cross-referencing, comparison, and the combination of a variety of sometimes seemingly incompatible cultural ideas (such as Pico's combination of the Cabbala, with Classical and Christian mysticism, for instance), fascinated the Florentine Neoplatonic Academy. This, as I have attempted to show, provided the basis of Rossetti's 'Religion of Love'. It is this syncretism that 'to all hearts all things shall signify'. Rossetti's religion is not non-Christian. Christianity has a symbolic input, as is shown by Rossetti's verse, but the position it holds has no higher authority than any other tradition of divine love ('God is Love'), as Rossetti's conflation of Christ and Love in *Love's Testament* shows. At the same time the adherents of the 'universal tradition', 'to their father's children they shall be / In act and thought of one goodwill'.

Rossetti's poetry is not only based upon the specific syncretic tradition of universal love, but it is also traditional in the widest sense. The problem Rossetti faced, almost

from the moment of publication, was that his audience no longer recognised the tradition to which the poems belonged. Kathleen Raine writes of this difficulty;

Traditional poetry, learned or unlearned, is a language inseparable from those spiritual premises upon which it depends and from which its very terms are derived. It has this power fully only within the proper context of a traditional culture. When their universe of reference is unknown - or, as in the context of contemporary atheist humanism, denied outright - poetry and the other arts speak in obscure, and ultimately, a dead language. Yet the arts have in themselves a limited power of evoking and transmitting such knowledge, if not to the reason at least to the imagination.¹

This is precisely the situation with Rossetti's allegorical symbolism. Raine elsewhere states that this kind of knowledge

cannot in its nature be understood in academic terms. The merely academic study of magical symbolism may be likened to the analysis of musical scores by a student who does not know that the documents he meticulously annotates are merely indications for the evocation of music from instruments of whose very existence he is ignorant. Magic, in other words, is an art.²

Raine explains that the direct action of the symbol on the individual reader is an important means of addressing the collective experience of humanity of which we all partake:

Through identification with some one or other of those 'personifying spirits' ... we are able to participate in that cosmic whole which lends dignity and meaning to even its most insignificant parts each of which reflects the whole in that 'mirror of the heart' ... The archetypes - if we encounter them at all - are likely to appear as figures mysterious and nameless, belonging to no pantheon, no

¹ *Yeats the Initiate*, p.247.

² *Ibid*, p.177.

theological system. ... To the poet especially this freedom is essential - freedom to clothe the Moods in the dress of history, of locality, of dreams, of learned mythologies, or ... with all these together. Syncretism may be bad for theology but it is indispensable to poetry.¹

This is Rossetti's method and intention in the sonnets of *The House of Life*, as well as in the various manifestations within his paintings. His method is a system of mystic alchemy which takes place within the laboratory of the heart and the alembic of the soul. His vehicle is a religion of universal Love whose means of transmission is through the use of symbol and parable.

Rossetti showed himself aware of this power of transmission through symbolic art, when he wrote of Blake's work:

any who can here find anything to love will be the poet-painter's welcome guests, still such a feast is spread first of all for those who can know at a glance that it is theirs and was meant for them; who can meet their host's eye with sympathy and recognition, even when he offers them the new strange fruits grown for himself in far-off gardens where he has dwelt alone, or pours for them the wines which he has learned to love in lands where they never travelled.²

Florence Boos summed this up when she wrote:

Perhaps one of the reasons why Rossetti has been so violently liked and disliked is this repeated use of series of images - if they evoke for the reader the same response they did for Rossetti, his poetry seems profoundly subjective; if one's inner correlatives are different, however, as they commonly are for persons living a century after any poet's work, his preferences can seem a series of cheap devices. ... Although this would seem a weakness, to those with identical subjective correlatives his poetry could properly seem all the more evocative and

¹ Ibid, p.216.

² 'William Blake', *Works*, I, 459. The passage seems particularly appropriate to its author.

direct for its avoidance of many less intuitive structures of thought and imagery: 'in silence speech, And in a word complete community'.¹

One senses that Rossetti is using a psychological language rendered suddenly dated by changes in taste, but not sufficiently dated to grant him the distancing analysis accorded other presumably more typical Victorians.²

While the above comments are indeed true, they are further complicated by the inherently secretive nature of the tradition itself, delighting as it did in the complexities of parable, allegory, and the disguises of emblematic imagery in both word and icon. It was designed to withhold its secrets from those not brought up in the tradition. It must be stressed that this was a magico-mystical tradition, and that the poet 'writes in parables [occultamente] of things most excellent drawn from the divine fountain head'.³ If God is the master-poet, and Love is a Magus, it was the role of earthly artist and poet to interpret his mysteries as experienced through the medium of his soul. The artist is thus the earthly representative of God, a microcosm reflecting the ultimate creative consciousness. Robb explains:

The poets of the nineteenth century claimed for themselves a peculiar dignity as channels of revelation and 'unacknowledged legislators of the world.' The old pride of the Renaissance artist lives again in them, but their consciousness of superior power is often tempered by a sense of the isolation of the seer. His pre-eminence is a pre-eminence of suffering; in attaining the heights and depths of human experience he takes upon him a burden that sets him apart from the insensitive multitude which he has to guide and enlighten.⁴

... At the same time the motive of ideal love appears in nineteenth-century literature in a form that would have seemed wholly familiar to Ficino or Michelangelo. The elusive quality in things that the Florentines had called the

¹ Florence Saunders Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p.75.

² Ibid, p.91.

³ Christoforo Landino in the Preface to his *Commentary on Dante*. Robb, p.238.

⁴ Ibid, pp.275.

Idea of Beauty evokes in the Romantics a like passion of worship and a like anguish of desire.¹

We cannot end this section without confronting one of the major problems that was to threaten this tradition of Sacred Love in the nineteenth century, and which was directed at Rossetti and Swinburne in particular: the charge of immorality. If one is to proclaim a 'Religion of Love' in a puritanical age, one immediately runs the risk of being misinterpreted. One of Rossetti's greatest difficulties, founded in his divergence from the Platonic mainstream, was his attempt to marry body to soul through physical passion. There seems in hindsight little possibility that Rossetti's 'erotic magic' could have avoided censure in Victorian England. *The House of Life*, 'could more fitly be entitled *The House of Love*', William Sharp pointed out in his biography of Rossetti.² Joseph Knight agreed that, "The House of Life" is, as has been well said, "The House of Love".³ Indeed, this title may well have been preferred by Rossetti had he not anticipated the censure of critics such as Buchanan.⁴ It will be obvious to the reader that the Platonic tradition was a vigorously moral one, believing as it did, that the soul's union with perfect beauty must result in perfect virtue. Rossetti's reinterpretation of this tradition, I would argue, is no less moral, although it runs the danger that it may appear to be so if one is not aware of his terms of reference. Joseph Knight wrote:

In his work generally, however, he was a worshipper; and much transcendentalism and devotion characterises his pictures of womanhood. ... Beauty was with him the object of pursuit, and the mystery of its significance is such that all effort after its attainment, and all homage rendered it, were in his eyes essentially reverential.⁵

So deeply impressed with the symbolism of most things in Nature was indeed Rossetti that he incurred, as is known, the charge of coarse realism. To his mind

¹ Ibid, p.277.

² DGR, p.409.

³ Joseph Knight, *Life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Walter Scott, 1887), p.160.

⁴ Buchanan described *The House of Life* as 'probably the identical one where the writer found Jenny', that is, a brothel. Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.499.

⁵ Knight, p.137.

sanctities were inherent in human relations, and the notion of finding uncleanness in homage, even though physical, was scarcely to be conceived.¹

In answer to Buchanan, Rossetti himself quoted the sonnet *Love-sweetness*, stating, ‘all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared ... to be as nought if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times’.²

In the octave of Sonnet 8, *Love's Lovers*, Rossetti lists three examples of love's follies: those who approach love as if it were a game to pass the time; those who revel in the drama of love as though it were a part for them to play; and those who participate in a constant stream of the ephemeral and superficial delights of love, passing from one lover to the next without a thought. In the sestet, he relates how his beloved approaches Love in the correct manner. It will be noted that the motif of the kiss plays an essential part in the symbolism:

My lady only loves the heart of Love:
Therefore Love's heart, my lady, hath for thee
His bower of unimagined flower and tree:
There kneels he now, and all-anhungered of
Thine eyes grey-lit in shadowing hair above,
Seals with thy mouth his immortality.³

Closely related to this sonnet is Sonnet 23, *Love's Baubles*. Perhaps one of the strangest of the sonnets in the entire sequence, and dense in allegorical meaning, *Love's Baubles* presents a contrast between the indulgence of sensual passions and the purity of spiritual love. The octave is a symbolic representation of ‘the Love who is the son of the common Aphrodite’, who ‘is of the body rather than of the soul’⁴ This is Aphrodite Dione who governs generation and increase; in essence it depicts her cornucopia, which

¹ Ibid, p.127.

² ‘The Stealthy School of Criticism’, *Works* I, 482.

³ Here Rossetti presents us with another image of Rosicrucian Paradise where grow the ‘unimagined flower and tree’ (c.f. the earlier quotation from *A Last Confession*). The beloved here assumes the role of the Goddess of the Tree who bestows immortality on Love through the medium of the kiss.

⁴ *Symposium*, p.9. I would prefer to think of these higher and lower Loves, not as separate beings as Plato implies, but rather as Rossetti's ‘two sides of one coin’: they are simply two aspects of the same impulse (or perhaps, ‘emanation’).

is her symbol, bursting with the fruits of fertility. The ladies who 'round him ... thronged in warm pursuit', and who 'Fingered and lipped and proffered the strange store', are those who exert 'the mere animal attraction [of] Fanny and her like', as Doughty puts it¹ - 'Gifts that I felt my cheek was blushing for', the poet declares. The beloved's love is of another calibre:

At last Love bade my Lady give the same:
And as I looked, the dew was light thereon;
And as I took them, at her touch they shone
With inmost heaven-hue of the heart of flame.
And then Love said: 'Lo! when the hand is hers,
Follies of love are love's true ministers.'

In this, Passion of Love becomes Love's Worship. Sexual love is not denied, but raised to a higher level; one where its passion and fervour perform a proper function.

In Sonnet 9, *Passion and Worship*, each angelic aspect of Love stands before the Beloved, Love's Passion claiming superiority over Love's Worship. The Beloved declares that both are her due; Passion of Love representing Love's sacred fire in sun-symbolism, and Worship of Love representing Love's mysteries in lunar-symbolism. Both are part of the whole, and represent the dualities of Love that are unified through its proper practice.

In *The Honeysuckle*, which is a symbol of sexuality and fertility, and an attribute of Aphrodite, we find the same symbolism of lower and higher beauties as in *Love's Baubles*. In the first stanza, the poet struggles to pick the flower from where it grows among the thorns of a high hedge. In so doing, he 'was torn / And fouled', but 'yet found it sweet and fair'. In the second stanza, he finds the symbolic equivalent of Platonic Beauty:

Thence to a richer growth I came,
Where, nursed in mellow intercourse,
The honeysuckles sprang by scores,

¹ *Victorian Romantic*, p.422.

Not harried like my single stem,
All virgin lamps of scent and dew.
So from my hand that first I threw,
Yet plucked not any more of them.

The symbolism of the virgin dew (as in *Love's Baubles*), and the play on the word 'plucked' make the meaning obvious.

In Sonnet 32, *Equal Troth*, it is not the amount of love that we profess that is of importance, but its quality:

If not to sum but worth we look, -
Thy heart's transcendence, not my heart's excess, -
Then more a thousandfold thou lov'st than I.

From these examples it seems clear that although Rossetti's spiritual journey starts in the delight and praise of female physical beauty, his ultimate message is no different from that of the Neoplatonists:

The object of love is beyond the body, and the beauty of things lies in their resemblance to a spiritual pattern.

If we delight in bodies, in souls, or in angels, it is not their appearance we love, but the divinity within them - in bodies the shadow, in souls the likeness, and in angels the image of God. Now, therefore, we love God in all things: and finally we shall love everything in God.¹

And therefore burning in this most happie flame, she [*the soul*] ariseth to the noblest part of her which is the understanding, and there no more shadowed with the darke night of earthly matters, seeth the heavenly beautie...²

(Authors parentheses.)

¹ Ficino, quoted Vyvyan, p.49.

² Castiglione, Ibid, p.56.

CHAPTER 5

BEAUTY'S PAGEANT: ROSSETTI'S ALLEGORY OF LOVE.

In this chapter I will examine Rossetti's use of allegory. Although the use of allegory is primarily an invention of the Middle Ages, it supplied both the form and method of much of the later Renaissance Neoplatonic verse. In Rossetti's verse there is little or no distinction drawn between ideas of differing provenance: all are lumped together, unceremoniously and eclectically, to form a whole which remains difficult for the reader to disentangle and interpret.

In *The House of Life*, Rossetti's use of allegory is present from the preliminary sonnet, which introduces us to the Powers which preside over the House: Life, Love, and Death. Sonnet 1, *Love Enthroned*, continues the theme - 'I marked all kindred Powers' - adding to the initial trinity those that hold sway over the fate of the individual; Truth, Hope, Fame, Oblivion, and Youth. There will be those who argue that these are not true allegorical figures in the proper mediaeval sense at all - that is an external symbolisation of an internal 'personality' or emotion, - and that Rossetti does not employ them as independent characters acting within the psyche. It is quite true that Rossetti does not portray his Powers in this way, and that they more easily recall the carven images on the wall that surrounds the Garden of the Rose. It is in his portrayal of the figure of Love that Rossetti most nearly conforms to the mediaeval formula, and as may be expected, it most nearly conforms to the same figure as depicted by Dante.

Rossetti's description of the *Vita Nuova* as Dante's 'autopsychology' is a remarkably perceptive insight into the essential function of allegory. In mediaeval allegory, the action most often takes place in the form of a dream. The 'stage' on which the action takes place is thus within the inner consciousness of the dreamer himself. This is the case in the *Roman de la Rose*, and in several of Chaucer's poems, and remained a common device well into the Renaissance. This 'internalisation' and figurative characterisation has much in common with Rossetti's *House of Life*. Rossetti wrote: 'I should wish to deal in poetry chiefly with personified emotions; and in carrying out my scheme of the *House of Life*, ... [I] shall try to put in action a complete *dramatis*

personae of the soul'.¹ The actors on this 'stage' constitute the inner 'biography' of the dreamer in exactly the manner that Rossetti describes in Sonnet 60, *Transfigured Life*, when he states that Joy and Pain are the parents of the Song, which is itself transfigured by Art. The allegorical characters are those who inhabit this internal landscape; they are the manifestations of emotions, passions, and fears and the tale is told through them rather than through personalities who exist in the external world. It should be remembered, however, that these 'players' have, of necessity, a foundation in the external world. This brings into play the complex set of relationships that I have discussed earlier when considering the mirror image; that is, the notion that the corporeal world is an imperfect mirror of heaven, and the internal realm is a psychological mirror of the external world. This indicates the nature of Dante's Beatrice, who exists in all three worlds simultaneously. The figure of Love in the *Vita Nuova* is similar, being at once a divinity, an external vision or projection, and part of Dante himself. Dante offers a long explanation of this, which begins:

It might be here objected unto me ... that I have spoken of Love as though it were a thing outward and visible: not only a spiritual essence, but as a bodily substance also. The which thing, in absolute truth, is a fallacy; Love not being of itself a substance, but an accident of substance.² ...

This is demonstrated in the passage where Love combines with Dante himself, just as he does with the poet in *Willowwood* IV: 'And when he had spoken thus, all my imagining was gone suddenly, for it seemed to me that Love became a part of myself'.³ At the end of his discourse he adds:

for it were a shameful thing if one should rhyme under the semblance of metaphor or rhetorical similitude, and afterwards, being questioned thereof, should be unable to rid his words of such semblance, unto their right understanding.⁴

¹ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-67), II, 850, letter 992, to Dr Gordon Hake, 21st April 1870.

² *Works*, II, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, p.40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.73.

Thus the substance of the allegorical figure is, in reality, a state of mind. However, in both a poetic and an imaginative sense, the distinction is unnecessary, as the figure itself expresses the intended meaning, and this is how it is used by Rossetti.

The allegorical figure fulfils the same function as the mythological divinity. Both serve the purpose of defining, or characterising, abstract ideas. Put crudely, Mars represents all our personal predilections toward aggressive, brutal, and destructive behaviour, and ceases to exist the moment our character changes. Both mediaeval and Renaissance art, literature, and philosophy made full use of these symbolic characterisations, as did also the alchemist. But, we may ask, how does this differ from the Platonic characterisation of Beauty in the mythical figure of the higher and lower Aphrodite? The answer is that this usage is rather in the form of parable than of allegory. Platonism is essentially abstract in its mode of thought, and employs mythology as a vehicle through which to express abstract ideas. In mediaeval allegory, abstract concepts are 'clothed', so to speak, usually by mythological or moral figures, which enact the story being told, which itself often takes the form of an extended parable. At first sight, it is as if an act of theatre - however profound - had replaced a religious ritual.¹ This, however, would be to mistake the mediaeval mind, which was at once more subtle and more childlike in its approach to religious truth than is possible to a later more materialistic view of the universe. The moral of the mediaeval allegory, placed in context, was entirely transparent. CS Lewis describes how this functions:

the practice of using mythological forms to hint theological truths was well established and lasted as late as the composition of *Comus*. It is, for most poets and in most poems, by far the best method of writing poetry which is religious without being devotional - that is, without being an act of worship to the reader. In the mediaeval allegories and the renaissance masks, God, if we may say so without irreverence, appears frequently, but always *incognito*. Every one

¹ It should be remembered that in a Classical context, there was little or no difference between an act of theatre and religious ritual.

understood what was happening, but the occasion remained an imaginative, not a devotional one.¹

This might be a description of Rossetti's method, but Rossetti's essential problem was that not 'every one understood what was happening'. Almost Rossetti's entire output as an artist hovers between the mediaeval and Renaissance ideal, modified by a thin overlay of Romanticism. Both Rossetti and Morris had a deep and intimate acquaintance with the literature of the Middle Ages, as this letter to William shows:

I have done but little in any way, having wasted several days at the Museum, where I have been reading up all manner of old romaunts, to pitch upon stunning words for poetry. I have found several, and also derived much enjoyment from the things themselves, some of which are tremendously fine. I have copied out an exquisite little ballad, quoted in the preface to one of the collections.²

Mackail, Morris's biographer, relates that his 'lifelong passion, that for the thirteenth century in all its works and ways, grew not only on the unremitting study of mediaeval architecture, but on a rapid and prodigious assimilation of mediaeval chronicles and romances.'³

Rossetti could not escape his sources, nor would he have been the artist he was had he done so, and this is the essential difference between him and his imitators. It is perhaps ironic that Rossetti, who attempted to re-invent mediaevalism as a genre for the nineteenth century, failed because the art of reading symbol and allegory had been forgotten, while Morris, who attempted to preserve what he could of mediaevalism succeeded in reinventing it for his own time. In other words, Rossetti abandoned mediaevalism while retaining the allegorical method, while Morris abandoned the allegory while attempting to retain the mediaevalism.⁴ The materialism of nineteenth

¹ CS Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp.355-6.

² *Letters*, I, 55, letter 43, Tues. 18th Sept. 1849.

³ JW Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1899), I, 39. Mackail elsewhere notes: 'his reading in mediaeval Latin had been immense': I, 321-2.

⁴ Some might object that this is altogether too simplistic a view of Morris's work: it might be more realistic to state that Morris's entire output is an abstract summary of the underlying allegory (that of the Rosicrucian ideal) that was central to his life as an artist.

century England, however, was not only unfamiliar with Rossetti's often obscure sources, but also with the approach which these sources demand. Modern readers have similar problems, as CS Lewis recognises:

It is only natural that we, who live in an industrial age, should find difficulties in reading poetry that was written for a scholastic and aristocratic age. We must proceed with caution, lest our thick, rough fingers tear the delicate threads that we are trying to disentangle.¹

‘... and, to speak plainly, the art of reading allegory is as dead as the art of writing it, and more urgently in need of revival if we wish to do justice to the Middle Ages.’²

This is important if we are to understand the use Rossetti makes of the word ‘Pageant’ in the title of Sonnet 17, for a pageant, with the single exception of the court masque, is the genre most dominated by the allegorical figure. Once again, Rossetti's title is a key to his meaning. The word ‘pageant’ suggests the familiar mediaeval or Renaissance procession in which allegorical or religious figures were paraded through the streets on carts, each identified by their own symbolic accoutrements. ‘Beauty’ here is not abstract Platonic Beauty, but the symbolic manifestation of the Goddess Venus herself. Rossetti does not ask us to imagine that an actual pageant, with all its carts and raucous activity ‘Within this hour, within this room have passed’, but within the sestet he comes close to doing so, as he identifies the central figure of the progress through her symbols ‘Of lily or swan or swan-stemmed galiot’. It is at times such as this that ‘the intimate intertexture of a spiritual sense with a material form’³ comes close to failure in Rossetti's art.⁴ The pageant and the masque may well have been taken by Rossetti from *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius. At the end of this work, Lucius, in the form of an ass

¹ Op. cit., pp.173-4.

² Ibid, p.116.

³ WMR, in his introduction to the 1901 collected facsimile reprint of *The Germ*: republished as *The Germ: The Literary Magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1992), p.18. The phrase quoted represents ‘one of the influences which guided that movement’, that is, the PRB, and one which remained a distinguishing hallmark of Rossetti's vision throughout his career.

⁴ Another example that particularly springs to mind is Rossetti's late drawing of *The Question* (1875), and it is interesting to note - coincidentally - that a ‘swan-stemmed galiot’ also appears in the background of this design.

witnesses first of all a staged masque of the Judgement of Paris in which Venus naturally has the lead role:

Then in came Venus, smiling sweetly and greeted with a roar of welcome by the audience. She advanced to the centre of the stage, with a whole school of happy little boys crowding around her, so chubby and white-skinned that you might have taken them to be real cupids flown down from Heaven or in from the sea. They had little wings and little archery sets and (this was a nice touch) all carried lighted torches as if they were conducting their mistress to her wedding breakfast. In came a great crowd of beautiful girls: the most graceful Graces, the loveliest Seasons, who strewed the path before Venus with bouquets and loose flowers, propitiating her, as Queen of all pleasures, with the shorn locks of spring.¹

Later, Lucius finds his redemption in a procession of the Goddess Isis. I include these passages because they contain many symbolic details found in Rossetti's art.:

At the head walked women crowned with flowers, who pulled more flowers out of the folds of their beautiful white dresses and scattered them along the road; their joy in the Saviouress appeared in every gesture. Next came women with polished mirrors tied to the backs of their heads, which gave all who followed them the illusion of coming to meet the Goddess, rather than marching before her. Next, a party of women with ivory combs in their hands who made a pantomime of combing the Goddess's royal hair, and another party with bottles of perfume who sprinkled the road with balsam and other precious perfumes; and behind these a mixed company of women and men who addressed the Goddess as 'Daughter of the Stars' and propitiated her by carrying every sort of light - lamps, torches, wax-candles and so forth.²

¹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. by Robert Graves, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1950), pp.264-5.

² Ibid, p.275.

Meanwhile the pageant moved slowly on and we approached the sea shore ... There the divine emblems were arranged in due order and there with solemn prayers the chaste-lipped priest consecrated and dedicated to the Goddess a beautifully built ship, with Egyptian hieroglyphics painted over the entire hull; but first he carefully purified it with a lighted torch, an egg and sulphur. The sail was shining white linen, inscribed in large letters with the prayer for the Goddess's protection of shipping during the new sailing season. The long fir mast with its shining head was now stepped, and we admired the gilded prow shaped like the neck of Isis's sacred goose, and the long, highly-polished keel cut from a solid trunk of citrus-wood. Then all present, both priesthood and laity, began zealously stowing aboard winnowing-fans heaped with aromatics and other votive offerings and poured an abundant stream of milk into the sea as a libation.¹

The difficulty of reading allegory is revealed when Florence Boos questions the imagery of this sonnet:

We have been given much intensity, but little real description - what is a dawn pulse on the heart of heaven? What appearance is presented by an incarnate flower of culminating day? or what are marshalled marvels on the skirts of May? a glory of change? The first two images are synaesthetic, the two latter merely uninformative.²

Rossetti himself might answer, 'What masque of what old wind-withered New Year / Honours this Lady?' ... 'And how question here / These mummers of that wind-withered New Year?'³ The answer to these questions is that - enigmatic as they may appear - they are quite specific symbols that accompany the Goddess Aphrodite as we may picture her proceeding in her pageant or riding in her 'car'.⁴ As Kathleen Raine explains:

¹ Ibid, p.280.

² *The Poetry of Dante G Rossetti*, p.82.

³ *For Spring by Sandro Botticelli*.

⁴ The 'car' of a deity is commonly depicted in mythological iconography and in alchemical and astrological illustrations. It is not so much derived from the cart of the pageant, but rather the chariots

These correlations, by which the qualitative aspects of being may be explored, are at once complex and exact. One of the most striking - and to the novice surprising - features of magic is its meticulous precision. ... Whatever else the study of magic may be, it is a stringent discipline of all the faculties of the human mind.¹

Gombrich adds:

The quest for an 'authentic' description was not merely a question of aesthetic propriety or learned pedantry. To Ficino no less than to Albericus it was an established fact that the attributes and appearance of the Gods revealed their real essence. It was as important to establish the authentic image of a god or planet as to find its 'true name'. In both was hidden, for those who could read the esoteric language of ancient wisdom, the secret of their being.²

We may perhaps approach Florence Boos's questions as if they were riddles such as were the delight of the mediaeval mind; and in fact the first five lines of the octave do form a sort of riddle, as Rossetti himself poses the question 'What...?' The answer to the first two lines, 'What dawn-pulse at the heart of heaven, or last / Incarnate flower of culminating day', refers to the birth and death of the sun from and into the sacred Rose of Heaven, a Rosicrucian symbol that occurs throughout the art of the Aesthetic movement. Whether depicted as occurring over sea or earth, the concept of procession from, and return to, the Great Mother is implicit.³ The 'marshalled marvels on the skirts of May' are, as precisely depicted in Botticelli's *Primavera*, the splendours of Spring, the birth of new life to the earth. Morris's poem *Flora* provides a perfect illustration:

by which the ancients imagined the gods in the form of planets were transported across the heavens. The cart of the pageant is thus a crude counterpart of the heavenly chariot.

¹ *Yeats the Initiate*, pp.192-3.

² 'Botticelli's Mythologies', in *Symbolic Images*, pp.53-4.

³ This has its roots in the most ancient of Greek creation mythologies, in which the sun was born from and died into the Oceanus (later Ocean) each day. Oceanus was a Titan whose grand-daughter Aphrodite was begotten by Zeus on his daughter Dione. Oceanus and Tethys governed the planetary power of Venus. Although Oceanus was male, the sea has always been regarded as the Great Mother, as in stanza 33 of Swinburne's *The Triumph of Time*; 'I will go back to the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea.'

I am the handmaid of the earth,
I broider fair her glorious gown,
And deck her on her days of mirth
With many a garland of renown.

And while the Earth's little ones are fain
And play about the Mother's hem,
I scatter every gift I gain
From sun and wind to gladden them.

Another source is found in *The Golden Ass*, where Lucius describes his vision of the goddess as she rises from the sea: 'and along the entire hem [of her robe] a woven bordure of flowers and fruit clung swaying in the breeze'.¹ Ruskin's symbol of roses, which was printed on the title pages of his works, was taken from the gown of Flora in Botticelli's *Primavera*.²

The following couplet, 'Or song full-quired, sweet June's encomiast; / What glory of change by Nature's hand ammass'd' is a paean to the fullness of summer (as Beatrice follows Joan in the *Vita Nuova*), and the mystery of the ever-changing cycle of natural fertility and decay, again a birth/death symbol. However, the octave concludes, what are all these things compared to the beauty of the beloved? The message of the metaphor is of course obvious by now. The beloved stands in relationship to the Beloved, the Goddess, as the person playing the part of the Goddess in the pageant stands to the deity herself. She is 'Love's very vesture and elect disguise', the first line of the sestet tells us.³ We return to the three cornered pattern of reflection detailed earlier, of Godhead / external world / internal world; or divinity / material reflection / mental image, all of which co-exist simultaneously, each participating in the other. There is no difference

¹ P.270.

² 'And first, for their little vignette stamp of roses on title-page. It is copied from the clearest bit of the pattern of the petticoat of Spring, where it is drawn tight over her thigh, in Sandro Botticelli's picture of her, at Florence': *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by ET Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), XXVII, *Fors Clavigera* I, (1907), p.37, letter 22.

³ We should not forget that it was the purpose of Plato's Venus Dione to recreate a semblance of the Divine Beauty in material form.

between the person and the personified, the actor and the acted, human and deity, the two roles are spontaneously acted out together. What strikes us most is the recurrence of the fertility myth in Rossetti's imagery, and we are reminded of the allegorical figure of Dame Nature, or Natura, who plays such a prominent part in the symbology of mediaeval literature.

One of the consistent features of the mediaeval love-allegory, one which lasts into Renaissance Neoplatonic poetry, and is unsurprisingly re-utilised by William Morris, is the idea of the Earthly Paradise. Again, this is a mirror-image of the Heavenly Paradise. Lewis describes how this is pictured by the poet:

The poet is free to invent, beyond the limits of the possible, regions of strangeness and beauty for their own sake. ... Under the pretext of allegory something else has slipped in, and something so important that the garden in the *Romance of the Rose* itself is only one of its temporary embodiments - something which, under many names, lurks at the back of most romantic poetry. I mean the 'other world' not of religion, but of imagination; the land of longing, the Earthly Paradise, the garden east of the sun and west of the moon.¹

In the last phrase of this passage we recognise both the title and one of the sections of Morris's *Earthly Paradise*. Rossetti's celebrated 'bowers', the gardens and glades of his poetry and paintings, and the ever-present flowers with which he bedecks his heroines are testimony to his adherence to this mediaeval / Renaissance standard. Rossetti's verse is often described as having the qualities of a tapestry, and in mediaeval art and literature Nature is regularly depicted in this way. Mediaeval tapestries, which Morris took so much trouble to emulate in his designs, invariably depicted an allegorical scene in which the details were freighted with rich symbolic meaning.² Nature, as depicted in mediaeval art and literature, contains the same essence of symbolic content as it does in the works of Rossetti and Morris. Morris wrote; 'it is needful that a man should be touched with a real love of the earth, a worship of it, no less'.³ In a fit of

¹ Op. cit., pp.75-6.

² *Tapestry Trees*, in *Poems by the Way* is a good example; with its motto-like stanzas and brilliant concise imagery, it shows Morris's source of inspiration to be mediaeval tapestry-work, as the title indicates. Similarly, *The Flowering Orchard* is subtitled 'Silk Embroidery'.

³ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, II, 25.

ecstasy he declared, 'Oh me! Oh me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it... The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!'¹

In the previous chapter I pointed out the desire for a return to Eden in Rossetti's verse. In this respect, the School of Chartres in the first half of the twelfth century provided an important model for Rossetti and Morris. In this school such Platonism as was available at the time mingled with a belief that God's work was achieved through Nature. Lewis comments:

in the poets of the school Nature appears, not to be corrected by Grace, but as the goddess and the *vicaria* of God, herself correcting the unnatural. ... by two of its philosophers - Thiery and William of Conches - the Holy Ghost is identified with the *Anima Mundi* of the Platonists.²

The *Natura* of Statius and of Claudian, under the influence of its naturalistic philosophy, had been remade and become a new and appealing character. She, and her companion Genius [the force of generation], continued to fascinate the vernacular poets for many years.³

This is an important development, because, not only was this a significant evolution in literature, but also may be seen as a version of the approach followed by the alchemists, who believed that by reversing the process, God could be found through the penetration of Nature's mysteries. They depicted themselves as 'following in the footprints of Nature'.⁴ It was in this sense, perhaps, that Rossetti adhered (or rather professed to adhere) to the PRB demand for a faithfully minute depiction of Nature. I quote here from the Chartres School to illustrate my point; not only is it a wonderful fusion of Platonism and naturalism, but it also seems to express Rossetti's own quest:

¹ Ibid, I, 227.

² Op. cit., p.88.

³ Ibid, p.111.

⁴ As in Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens*, 1618, shown in Frances Yates's *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, plate 23. Williams writes that Bruno's mission was 'to teach that God is to be found in the study of Nature, that the laws of the visible world will explain those of the invisible, the union of science and humanity with Nature and with God': *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 28.

This must I do - go exil'd through the world
And seek for Nature till far hence I find
Her secret dwelling-place; there drag to light
The hidden cause of quarrel, and reknit,
Haply reknit, the long divided Love.

Johannes de Altavilla, *Architrenius*.¹

The figure of Dame Nature, in her various forms and names, and dressed in green, is depicted over and over again in Rossetti's canvases. It will also be noted in the above quotation that the universal desire to regain Eden through the reconciliation of spirit and matter is expressed. The same quest underlies allegorical representations of Courtly Love. There is a notable similarity between Rossetti's relationship with Jane Morris (for whom the greatest and most potent part of his love-poetry was written) and the ideals of Courtly Love, which would have been the more poignant because of both Rossetti's and Morris's intimate acquaintance and understanding of the subject. The situation is often one of adulterous love. The romances of Tristan and Iseult, and Lancelot and Guinevere were tremendously popular and influential in their own period, and there can be no doubt that Rossetti recognised his own predicament in the tales of the latter lover. Love allegory is the expression of a Religion of Love, which ran parallel to, and sometimes parodied, Christianity. In the allegory, it is Venus who rules the courts of love. The strength and the popularity of love allegory has to be seen in the mediaeval context in which it stands alongside a form of Catholicism in which the cult of the Virgin tended to overshadow the importance of Christ in the popular imagination. Thus Venus and Amor are the direct counterparts of the Virgin and Christ.² This eclecticism, perhaps itself the product of an enthusiastic misunderstanding, is demonstrated in the various cultural components that jostle for superiority in the Arthurian romances, and more particularly, in those of the Grail. Lewis describes the nature of Courtly Love:

¹ Lewis, p.110.

² It may be argued that the Church's assimilation of paganism had sufficiently blurred the distinction between the cult of the Virgin and the cult of the Great Mother. Chartres Cathedral is reputed to have long harboured an image of the Black Virgin (the Earth Mother) in its vaults, and it is almost certain that Santiago de Compostella did also, and that these images were for many mediaeval pilgrims the true objects of their veneration. In the case of the latter, the scallop-shell is the ambiguous symbol of Aphrodite, initiates of Eleusis, and St James: see Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Arkana, 1993), pp.558 and 645.

We find also the conception of lovers as the members of an *order* of Love, modelled upon the orders of religion: of an *art* of Love, as in Ovid; and of a *court* of Love, with solemn customs and usages, modelled on the feudal courts of the period. It will be seen that no final distinction is possible between the erotic religion, the erotic allegory, and the erotic mythology.¹

In the allegory, the Lady who presides over the court, and to whom the lover is devoted, is the representative of Venus. The higher court over which Venus presides is a garden - the Garden of the Rose. The poem of that name, the *Roman de la Rose*, unfinished by Guillaume de Lorris and completed by Jean de Meun, and later partially translated by Chaucer, was well known to Rossetti, who executed several designs under its influence. This poem includes incidents that are later found also in Rossetti's verse. A curious example is an episode which has much in common with Rossetti's *Willowwood*, but of which *Willowwood* is an inversion. Lewis describes the passage:

The dreamer in his wandering comes to a fountain. Above it, in small letters, he reads that this is the same fountain in which Narcissus saw his shadow, for whose love he died. The dreamer is afraid and draws back; but in the end his curiosity overcomes him and he also looks in. Around it the grass grows thick and luscious, both winter and summer. In the bottom of the fountain there lie two crystal stones, in which the whole garden can be seen reflected. This is the mirror perilous and the well of love, whereof many have told 'in romans and in boke'. As soon as he looks into the crystals he sees in them, a little way off, a garden of roses, and among them one bud not yet unclosed. He is filled with longing for that bud; and turning away from the reflection he rises and approaches the rose garden to pluck the bud itself.²

¹ Op. cit., p.32.

² Ibid, pp.128-9. The fountain with its crystals symbolise 'Love, first learned at a lady's eyes'; thus the familiar Platonic symbols of love passing through the eyes and into the soul of the beloved, who is the mirror of the self, is once again repeated.

The dreamer is not allowed to pick the bud, but has to content himself with a leaf growing near it. This reminds us of Rossetti's lovely drawing of Jane, entitled *The Roseleaf*, 1870¹ (Fig. 7), in which she is portrayed holding a spray of rose-leaves up to her mouth. The intended meaning of this picture is that Jane herself (and in particular, her face and lips), is the rose.² If this drawing was prompted by the romance, it seems likely that the meaning may be extended to indicate that Jane had not given herself in full to Rossetti; that the rose had withheld herself at this time.

While Venus and Natura may be depicted as separate entities in these mediaeval romances, it may be assumed that they are differing aspects of the same being - Nature, as it were, flows from Venus as the manifestation of her love and fertility. They are related to one another as the lower and higher Platonic Venuses. Again, we are brought back to the mirror image of macrocosm and microcosm, as Lewis notes:

From the lips of Genius, we learn for the first time that the garden of Love and Delight is, after all, only the imitation of a different garden... When we have seen the true garden we look back and realize that the garden of courtly love is an impostor. The well in Love's garden with its two crystal springs is but a parody of the triune well that rises in the 'park of good pasture.' The one garden contains corruptibles, the other incorruptibles.³

This 'other' garden is the equivalent of Eden, and as we have seen in the previous chapter, it shares the same quality of timelessness as the paradise of the Neoplatonist poets:

For alwey stant in oo moment
 Hir dai that nevere night hath shent,
 Ne hit conquered nevere a del;
 For no mesure temporel
 Hit nath, but alwey as at prime

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 215, plate 309. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

² We are also reminded of Dante's lines 'For like a flower on its stalk / So she holds the summit of my mind': quoted by William Anderson in *Dante the Maker*, p.184. Also Shakespeare's Sonnet 109: 'For nothing this wide universe I call, / Save thou, my rose; in it thou art my all.'

³ Op. cit., pp.151-2.

That brighte dai, withouten time
Of temps futur ne preterit,
Also hit laugheth, avere abit.¹

Venus, - identified by her red hair - dressed in the green of Nature, surrounded by flowers in her timeless garden, is the subject of Rossetti's painting, *La Ghirlandata*,² which must stand as his most triumphant celebration of this subject. His other outstanding depiction of the Goddess and her Rose Garden is *The Blessed Damozel*,³ which, far from illustrating the subject of his early poem, portrays the Venus of the romances. In the rose-garden behind her, lovers are seen embracing. In the predella, the courtly lover is shown dreaming of the true subject of his devotion.

Thus, the Goddess of the Rose Garden is not only Nature, but Nature Perfected. The Garden which is the Paradise of the Love-goddess is the pagan counterpart of the Christian Eden. The key to the Garden, in either sense, is right loving, or more precisely, the perfection of love within the individual. The perfection of nature is intimately related to the perfection of love within the human being. Here we may see the roots of the alchemical and Rosicrucian quests. The quest of courtly love is the idealisation of love in much the same manner as is in Neoplatonism; indeed Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* is no more than an updating of the theme. This same idealisation and spiritual perfection of love is at the core of Rossetti's achievement. Rossetti's Sonnet 8, *Love's Lovers*, and Sonnet 23, *Love's Baubles*, elucidate his ethic of love:

My lady only loves the heart of Love:
Therefore Love's heart, my lady, hath for thee,
His bower of unimagined flower and tree. (Son. 8.)

But behind this imagery of Paradise and Nature Perfected lies another theme. It will be noted that the more important of Rossetti's themes in *The House of Life* come in pairs and higher multiples, and *Beauties Pageant* is accompanied by the sister-sonnet,

¹ Ibid, p.153. Lines 20010-16.

² Surtees Cat. no. 232, plate 334. Guildhall Art Gallery.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 244, plate 355. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University. *La Ghirlandata* and *The Blessed Damozel* are discussed further in Chapter 9.

number 18, *Genius in Beauty*. Again the title alerts us to the fact that there is a hidden significance contained within. 'Genius', is here not meant only in the usual sense, but also carries its root meaning from the Latin *genitum*, to beget. This is the sense the word holds in the romances, where Genius (as in the *Roman de la Rose*) is the spirit or priest of Nature. Rossetti's sonnet starts, 'Beauty like hers is genius.' The second half of the octave runs,

Nay, not in Spring's or Summer's sweet footfall
More gathered gifts exuberant Life bequeaths
Than doth this sovereign face, whose love-spell breathes
Even from its shadowed contour on the wall.

We may perhaps understand the wall as that which surrounds and encloses the Rose Garden. The lines above repeat the theme of the first part of the octave of *Beauty's Pageant*, which I have shown to be about the fertility of 'Spring's or Summer's sweet footfall'. The 'sovereign face' to which Rossetti here alludes is that of the Rose, or, more precisely, Natura. Genius, as I have stated earlier, is the generating spirit of Nature. Thus, behind the *Romance of the Rose*, lie the vestiges of the ancient fertility myth - the Goddess has not quite lost her original and all-important role as Mother of All Living. Here, indeed, Love is indeed 'the fountain and origin of all good things'¹ in a very literal sense - it, or rather she, is the fountain of Life itself. In the mediaeval love allegories, Venus is the Queen of the Court of Love, but she rules without a King; in popular mediaeval Catholicism, Mary is Queen of Heaven, but her King is strangely absent from her court, and the Churches' acknowledgement of her in this role is grudging and uneasy. For the everyday folk of the world, for whom the older fertility rituals were closer and more necessary for their survival and wellbeing, it was to the Great Mother that they turned, whether she was Venus, Natura, or Mary Virgin, and, more importantly, it was necessary for the Queen to have a consort if she were to function properly. This provides a model for the scenario of Courtly Love in which adultery is so constant a theme. The origins are to be found in myth; Venus was promiscuous, for this was her nature. She had to be, because her function was that of

¹ Ibid, p.34, quoting Andreas Capellanus.

fertility, and she had to have a new Year-king annually. This was necessary for the continued fertility of corn and kine. So the adultery of Guinevere, for example, is only to be expected. Lancelot acts as surrogate for the absent King in his role as Sun-god, and his role is to provide 'love' for Guinevere as the Earth-goddess, Natura. The entire structure of Courtly Love 'masques' the ancient fertility rituals. Lewis expands on this:

But the consistent tendency of medieval love poetry was to substitute for Venus and her son a King and Queen of Love who are, of course, themselves a pair of lovers. ... A King and Queen provided a better parallel to the real feudal courts of which Love's court was in some degree a copy. But if we reflect for a moment on the constant connexion between the god of Love and the month of May, we must suspect a deeper reason. We still have the Queen of the May, and we know that she once had a King: in the forgotten fertility rites of the *ludus de rege et regina* we may with great probability find one of the origins of the mediaeval King and Queen of Love, and the explanation of their continued charm. Myth is a stronger thing than formal literature. But as courtly literature is refreshed by myth from beneath, so it is also refreshed by larger philosophic conceptions from above.¹

This last sentence perfectly describes what we find in Rossetti's poetry.

In the *Roman de la Rose*, the triumph of Nature has an important part to play, as Lewis notes:

Nature and her priest Genius (the god of reproduction) hold the stage for nearly five thousand lines. ... in its earlier phases this unwieldy passage is nothing less than a triumphal hymn in honour of generation and of Nature's beauty and energy at large. It has really nothing to do with courtly love. Nature is introduced working at her forge not in the interests of human sentiment but in the interests of human perpetuity; labouring without rest and without weariness to keep her lead in a race with death. Death catches all individuals but cannot reach the inviolable Form: to preserve that Form incarnate the goddess is ever

¹ Ibid, p.120.

beating out new coins from those eternal stamps of hers which art imitates in vain. ... Her joy is based on an interest equally indifferent to human morality - that is not Nature's business - and to human refinements of feeling. What has impressed the poet - no doubt through the pages of Bernardus - is a vivid sense of the ageless fecundity, the endless and multiform going on, of life. This sweeps aside both his traditional love-lore and his traditional condemnation of it. And, what is more, this passes easily and inevitably into the expression of his delight in natural beauty. His 'Nature' is no abstraction. He does not forget in the personification *Natura* that visible nature which confronted him in the valley of the Loire.¹

I make no apology for including this long, though excellent, passage. At once we are at the motivating core of Rossetti's art. And we are at this core because it is also at the heart of the *philosophia perennis* from which he was drawing. If we stand in the gloomy mediaeval vault of Rosslyn Chapel, Lothian, which is claimed to be the example *par excellence* of pre-Masonic and Masonic symbolism, we see all around us a concrete hymn to Goddess Nature. The mediaeval builders of this architectural wonder have constructed a petrified allegory of exactly the sort described above. Rossetti attempts in his verse to achieve a Paradise Regained through a process of Nature Perfected, and the method by which this attempt is made is through a marriage of nature and spirit, of soul and the flesh. This is why such sonnets as *Nuptial Sleep* and *Supreme Surrender* are of primary importance. The 'lifting' of nature through the devoted love of the spirit was his essential message: where man had fallen from Grace and Eden through the flesh, Rossetti sought to reverse the process through the proper application of the same terms. This is the true function, for Rossetti, of the King and Queen, and their sacred union in the *hieros gamos*, for it is through this that perfection may be attained and Paradise Regained. This is the message behind his painting *Dantis Amor*.² This process was the principal task of the alchemists: to learn Nature's secrets and to perfect her, in order to restore the alchemist in particular, and humanity if possible, to a perpetual Eden. It is this thread, which passes through the Mediaeval romances, Renaissance Neoplatonism,

¹ Ibid, pp.149-50.

² Surtees Cat. no. 117, plate 179. Tate Gallery.

alchemy, the Romantics (and Blake in particular), to Rossetti (including his immediate circle of Burne-Jones, Morris¹ and Swinburne), and beyond him to Yeats and Graves.

The Goddess of Fertility and the Wheel of the Turning Year.

Within *The House of Life*, Rossetti uses the motif of the fertility cycle as a metaphor for personal development and change. In Part 1, where most of the sonnets on this theme are found, Rossetti aptly defines this process as 'Youth and Change'. I have already pointed out the importance of the motif of 'Spring', which is the most obvious point at which the cycle may be intercepted.

Rossetti's use of this cycle should come as no surprise to us, as he points to it in *A Sonnet*, where he introduces us to the archetypes of Life, Love, and Death: in a mythological sense, it is they, as aspects of the Goddess who preside over the cycle of the year. Rossetti uses the seasons as metaphors for periods of human development and experience. This is conventional. More exciting is the way in which Rossetti portrays man himself as the crop - the 'Germ', as it were - who grows, bears fruit, and is cut down, through the all-pervading influence of Love; Love here being the Sun-god of increase and decline, in a mythological sense, working through eternal Nature. Rossetti's message is that man is not above and outside Nature, in a Victorian scientific materialist view, but intimately part of Nature in an eternal, universal, and spiritual sense.

I have already demonstrated how Rossetti employed the motif of Spring as a symbol of spiritual transformation and transcendence in Sonnet 5, *Heart's Hope*:

Tender as dawn's first hill-fire, and intense
As instantaneous penetrating sense,
In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by.

¹ The process I have here described is perhaps more obvious in the works of Morris than in those of Rossetti. While the latter hid his message in symbol and allegory, there could be no better example than Morris of the high-priest of Nature. His entire life may be seen as an attempt to achieve an Earthly Paradise through politics as well as through his art which is an unadorned hymn to Nature of precisely the sort that inspired the decoration of Rosslyn Chapel.

And also in Sonnet 48, *Death-in-Love*, in the line, 'Bewildering sounds such as Spring wakens to'. In these Spring is seen as a symbol of religious transformation - it is the 'New Life'. In Sonnet 14, *Youth's Spring Tribute*, it is shown operating on a personal level, between the earthbound lover and his beloved. Here, amid the awakening of nature, love is hesitantly born; the beloved lies on the greensward with flowers poking through her hair, while 'On these debatable borders of the year / Spring's foot half falters'. In a beautiful metaphor of doubt, 'scarce she may not know / The leafless blackthorn-blossom from the snow'. But in the sestet, under the warming rays of the beneficent sun, doubt is resolved:

But April's sun strikes down the glades to-day;
So shut your eyes upturned, and feel my kiss
Creep, as the Spring now thrills through every spray,
Up your warm throat to your warm lips: for this
Is even the hour of Love's sworn suit-service,
With whom cold hearts are counted castaway.

In *Beauty's Pageant* and *Genius in Beauty*, we have already noted the allegorical nature of Spring bestowing the 'gathered gifts exuberant Life bequeaths'. In Sonnet 42, *Hope Overtaken*, there is a passing oblique reference in which, although Spring is not named, its symbolic presence is clear:

I deemed thy garments, O my Hope, were grey,
So far I viewed thee. Now the space between
Is passed at length; and garmented in green
Even as in days of yore thou stand'st to-day.

This forms a pair with the next sonnet, *Love and Hope*, in which the separated lovers come together as 'one hour at last, the Spring's compeer / Flutes softly to us from some green byeway'. Once again the invigorating sun blesses them in a familiar image of Paradise Regained: 'Our hearts shall wake to know Love's golden head / Sole sunshine

of the imperishable land'. This colour-imagery is again taken up in Sonnet 93, *The Sun's Shame II*, which refers to 'the World's grey Soul' and 'the green World'. Grey, in Rossetti's system, stands not only for defeat and blighted hope, as in Sonnet 38, *The Morrow's Message* and *Willowwood*, but also, as here, for age: both these represent Winter and the loss of Love. In this, we are reminded of those things which in the system of Courtly Love and *The Romance of the Rose*, debar the potential lover from the Garden; poverty, lack of leisure, and age. The 'True Woman', in Sonnet 56, is 'a sweetness more desired than Spring'.

In Sonnet 59, *Love's Last Gift*, which is the concluding sonnet of Part 1, the golden glories of summer have all but passed, as in this fine piece of allegory Love tells of what lies in store:

Love to his singer held a glistening leaf,
And said: 'The rose-tree and the apple-tree
Have fruits to vaunt or flowers to lure the bee;
And golden shafts are in the feathered sheaf
Of the great harvest-marshal, the year's chief,
Victorious summer ...

All are my blooms; and all sweet blooms of love
To thee I gave while Spring and Summer sang;
But Autumn stops to listen, with some pang
From those worse things the wind is moaning of.
Only this laurel dreads no winter days:
Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise.'

Here, I jump to Sonnet 87, *Hoarded Joy*, which seems to represent the poet's response to Love's message:

I said: 'Nay, pluck not, - let the first fruit be:
Even as thou sayest, it is sweet and red,
But let it ripen still. The tree's bent head

Sees in the stream its own fecundity
And bides the day of fullness. Shall not we
At the sun's hour that day possess the shade,
And claim our fruit before its ripeness fade,
And eat it from the branch and praise the tree?

I say: 'Alas! our fruit hath wooed the sun
Too long, - 'tis fallen and floats adown the stream.
Lo, the last clusters! Pluck them every one,
And let us sup with summer; ere the gleam
Of autumn set the year's pent sorrow free,
And the woods wail like echoes from the sea.'¹

In this evocative portrait of the abundance and leisure of late summer, the ripe fruits stand as a metaphor for the lives of the lovers themselves.² We also recall that other sonnet of Love's cornucopia, Sonnet 23, *Love's Baubles*, in which the abundant and diverse fruits of love are offered to Amor as the Harvest King, 'the great harvest-marshal, the year's chief'. Here the fertility myth is very evident; the fruits of man are to be gathered in. In Sonnet 7, *Supreme Surrender*, 'the love-sown harvest-field' yields its tribute:

Methinks proud Love must weep
When Fate's control doth from his harvest reap
The sacred hour for which the years did sigh.

¹ Compare this line with the following from stanza 23 of Swinburne's *Hertha*: 'In the clash of my boughs with each other ye hear the waves sound of the sea.'

² This poem was written in 1870 when both Rossetti and Jane were both well beyond the first flush of youth, and were celebrating their mature love for one another. We may also note here the Tree of Life motif, of which the lovers themselves (the fruit) represent the year's crop. This metaphor is also to be found in Bulwer Lytton's Rosicrucian novel *Zanoni*, p.238: 'Man's common existence is as one year to the vegetable world: he has his spring, his summer, his autumn, and winter - but only *once*.' The Rosicrucian's aim is to stand outside this cycle and defy time: 'He was to know the *renewal of life*; the seasons that chilled to winter should yet bring again the bloom and the mirth of spring.' Rossetti's gloom in *not* being able to do so is well evidenced in the sonnets.

The message of Sonnet 41, *Through Death to Love*, is that there is a Power greater than Death the Reaper:

Tell me, my heart, - what angel-greeted door
Or threshold of wing-winnowed threshing-floor
Hath guest fire-fledged as thine, whose lord is Love?

In Sonnet 28, *Soul-Light*, are the lines,

After the fulness of all rapture, still,

Such fire as Love's soul-winnowing hands distil

and the poet awaits the spiritual transformation of the 'reaping' - the death that precedes the rebirth of the soul¹:

And as the traveller triumphs with the sun,
Glorying in heat's mid-height, yet startide brings
Wonder new-born, and still fresh transport springs
From limpid lambent hours of day begun; -
Even so, through eyes and voice, your soul doth move
My soul with changeful light of infinite love.

In other words, to summarise the complete cycle, love is a germ which lies dormant (Son. 2) until awakened by Spring as Beauty, grows, reaches maturity in Summer, and is harvested at the death of the year; but although the Year-king dies physically, his soul is immortal. So also the poet and the man. This, so far, is the cycle of *The House of Life*. Mythologically the seed is saved and the cycle continues: it is the *philosophia perennis*.

¹ Here we are reminded of the passage from *The Golden Ass* quoted earlier in which the symbol of the winnowing-fan is present. It is in the procession of the Goddess that Lucius is 'reborn' from the form of the animalistic ass and restored to his true shape through the benign intervention of 'the Saviouress' Isis. The winnowing-fan is a symbol of the Goddess's function as Corn-queen.

But within Rossetti's cycle some canker has entered and set the system askew. Some dark force has pervaded the light as in Sonnet 98, *He and I*:

This was the little fold of separate sky
Whose pasturing clouds in the soul's atmosphere
Drew living light from one continual year:
How should he find it lifeless? He, or I?

Here the fertility metaphor is continued from *Genius in Beauty*. In the sestet of this sonnet, the fertility of intellect is bestowed as a grace on the poet in the form of poetic capacity, in recognition of which Love presents the eternal laurel in *Love's Last Gift*. Here, however, the flock of 'pasturing clouds in the soul's atmosphere' (that is, the poet's thoughts, the flock of the intellect) has become blighted, infertile, and lifeless. In Sonnet 64, *Ardour and Memory*, the poet recalls Spring as it should be reborn into the world:

The cuckoo-throb, the heartbeat of the Spring;
The rosebud's blush that leaves it as it grows
Into the full-eyed fair unblushing rose;
The summer clouds that visit every wing
With fires of sunrise and of sunset;
The furtive flickering streams to light re-born
'Mid airs new-fledged and valorous lusts of morn,
While all the daughters of the daybreak sing:-¹

These ardour loves, and memory: and when flown
All joys, and through dark forest-boughs in flight
The wind swoops onward brandishing the light,
Even yet the rose-tree's verdure left alone
Will flush all ruddy though the rose be gone;

¹ An image borrowed from Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job, Plate 14: *The Morning Stars Sang Together*.

With ditties and with dirges infinite.

The 'rose-tree' plays on Rossetti's name. The rose, who is gone, is Jane as representative of the Goddess. This is the cause of the blight in the Rose-garden. From this point on, life seems worthless, as in Sonnet 83, *Barren Spring*:

Once more the changed year's turning wheel returns:
And as a girl sails balanced in the wind,
And now before and now again behind
Stoops as it swoops, with cheek that laughs and burns, -
So Spring comes merry towards me here, but earns
No answering smile from me, whose life is twin'd
With the dead boughs that winter still must bind,
And whom to-day the Spring no more concerns.

Rossetti's phrase 'the changed year's turning wheel returns' is interesting in this context. Apart from any symbolic import, this statement had a deeper personal meaning for Rossetti, a reminder of the remorseless passage of time in his own life. May-day, the almost universal celebration of Spring, also held a personal significance for Rossetti: 'I myself was born on old May Day ('12') in the year (1828) after that in which Blake died.'¹ This statement carries the implication that he may have considered himself to be the re-incarnation of Blake, or at least, of his philosophy, returning to the world with Spring's rebirth.²

The symbol of the 'year's turning wheel' is an important motif. Bruno writes: 'the greater number of sages believe that Nature delights in this changeful circulation which is seen in the whirling of her wheel'.³ The circle of the wheel intersected by the spokes of the solstices and the equinoxes is central to western ritual magic, and all magic must have its basis in the desire to influence the forces operating between man and the Godhead which affect the continuity of life on earth. To this symbol may be added the

¹ Hall Caine, *Recollections of Rossetti*, p.17.

² He certainly makes the connection between Blake's death and his own birth. This may account for the strange self-questioning in the second half of the octave in Sonnet 73, *The Choice III*.

³ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 120.

four further spokes of the Celtic fire-festivals which help the sun on its journey through the year.¹ The importance of this eight-fold Celtic year-cycle underlies the entire system Rossetti was using. The symbol of the solar-wheel is the basis of all types of cross, including the two basic types of the Rosicrucian cross; the St George's Cross (within or without a circle), and the red saltire.² Midway between these is the Celtic cross with four splayed arms within a circle. All represent the same thing, the solar disc-wheel.

An example of this symbolism appears, I believe, in the sestet of Sonnet 94, *Michelangelo's Kiss*:

O Buonarruoti, - good at Art's fire-wheels
To urge her chariot! - even thus the Soul ...

William ascribed the above lines to a mistake on Rossetti's part:

Rossetti here takes the surname Buonarruoti, and assumes that it is compounded of the words 'buon-a-ruote' - *i.e.*, 'good at wheels.' I think this is decidedly incorrect.³

It seems likely that Rossetti's reference was to the fire-wheel of the turning solar year. The word 'Art' I believe to refer to the 'Art' of the Arcana with which old Gabriele connected Michelangelo.⁴ What Rossetti is saying in this sonnet is, I think, that he acknowledges Michelangelo's position, not only within the Neoplatonic tradition, but also within the occult tradition it embraced, and which so fascinated Gabriele.

¹ The year sequence runs: Winter solstice, 21 Dec.; Imbolc, 2 Feb.; Spring equinox, 21 Mar.; Beltane, 1 May; Summer solstice, 21 June; Lughnasadh, 1 Aug.; Autumn equinox, 21 Sept.; Samhain, 31 Oct. - 1 Nov. Naturally, these have a host of correspondences attached to them. Scottish quarter-days correspond to the old fire-festivals, while English quarter-days correspond to the solstices and equinoxes.

² The basis of the Rosicrucian cross is examined fully in the next chapter. The Rosicrucian equal-armed cross-in-circle bears the same symbolism as the Celtic cross. Some claim is made that the eight-pointed Maltese Cross of the Knights Templar (red), and the Hospitallers, the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem (black), also have Rosicrucian associations.

³ *Designer and Writer*, fn, p.254. William goes on to give the correct meaning of the name, which he believes to be 'Good adjutant'.

⁴ Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.47.

The Beloved as the image of the Goddess.

I have described the triangular relationship between deity, the external world, and the internal image, each of which exists as a mirror image of the other. In *The House of Life*, as well as in his other verse and paintings, Rossetti continually splits his intention through this prismatic mechanism. For example, if he pictures 'a girl', it almost certainly contains co-existent functions and references towards both the 'ideal' (or 'ideal beauty'), and the 'internal' emotional response within the painter primarily, and the viewer secondarily. If one takes, for instance, *Proserpine*, the 'ideal' references are obvious: Classical deity, Queen of Tartarus, the death functions of the Goddess, the Dark side of Beauty, etc. The 'internal' references are: suffering Beloved, memory, separation, grief, longing, etc. The painting itself depicts both Jane as beloved, and Jane as Goddess simultaneously. My example is of necessity crude; it denotes merely the allegorical structure. In the following quotation, E.H. Gombrich describes the Neoplatonist approach to the depiction of the Goddess of Beauty, which differs little, if at all, from Rossetti's:

Whatever the actual 'programme' was that underlies this commission we know that it is the result of passionate efforts to re-evolve the 'true' image of the goddess of love such as it had been created by the ancients. This 'true' image is the form which the heavenly entity hidden in the myth of Venus assumes when appearing before the eyes of the mortals. It both hides and proclaims her spiritual essence. The effects which such an image exerts on our senses in every meaning of the term would not have been considered incompatible with any spiritual or allegorical interpretation. On the contrary - this effect of the image on our passions and emotions would have been accepted as a proof of its true correspondence to the heavenly idea, a natural outcome of its magic efficacy. The patron who had it in his room for contemplation would surrender to its influence and would find in it a true guide to the supra-sensible principle of love or Beauty, of which Venus is but the visible embodiment and revelation.¹

¹ 'Icones Symbolicae' in *Symbolic Images*, pp.174-5. Gombrich is here describing the principles of Ficinian magic in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

It is my belief that Rossetti's use of the image of the beloved, both in terms of herself, and in her representation of divine Beauty, is similarly intended as a vehicle for Ficinian magic. The intensity of the emotional content - the very 'power' which Rossetti invested in every loving brushstroke - combined with the subjectivity of the chosen image conforms to this principle. The combination of verse and image, as employed in some of the paintings, adds the incantatory effect - sound combined with colour and image - to produce a powerful sense of ritual, as if the whole construct was imbued with a deep religious significance. Again Gombrich's comment on Botticelli is illuminating:

This attitude would explain the immense care and learning which was spent on the 'correct' equipment of figures not only in paintings but also in masques and pageantries where nobody but the organisers themselves could ever hope to understand all the learned allusions lavished on the costumes of figures which would only appear for a fleeting moment. Perhaps the idea was under the threshold of consciousness that by being in the 'right' attire these figures became genuine 'masks' in the primitive sense which turn their bearers into the supernatural beings they represent.¹

This explains the importance and significance of magical precision discussed earlier - 'it is a stringent discipline'. Both Rossetti's paintings and his verse become invocations in the truly magical sense, both of the unseen Goddess, and the absent beloved.

In *Beauty's Pageant*, this process is perhaps shown most clearly: Rossetti asks *who* 'Within this hour, within this room, [has] pass'd?' Is it the Goddess Beauty herself, or the beloved, or the emotional response that has altered the poet's consciousness to such an extent that he believes, if only momentarily, that he has been in the presence of a deity? The answer is, once again, suggested by the title of the sonnet, and the simple answer is 'both' - the beloved is the 'mask' of the Goddess.

In Sonnet 27, *Heart's Compass*, the relationship of beloved to Goddess is well expressed:

Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,

¹ Ibid, p.176.

But as the meaning of all things that are;

The evident heart of all life sown and mown.

Even such Love is; and is not thy name Love?

The use of the word 'compass' in the title is masterly. Three images are suggested. The first is taken directly from the *Vita Nuova*, where Beatrice is described as the number nine, which is 'the meaning of all things that are'. The number nine is the circumference that 'encompasses' all things; it is the shell of the material universe.¹ It is 'Nature'. The 'Heart' of the title is the centre of all things; where the circumference is diversity, the centre is unity. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante asks Love:

'Why weepest thou, Master of all honour?' And he made answer to me: '*Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes: tu autem non sic.*'²

Dante is mystified by this answer, and asks Love for an elucidation, which Love denies to him. Rossetti supplies a footnote to this passage:

'I am as the centre of a circle, to which all parts of the circumference bear an equal relation: but with thee it is not thus.' This phrase seems to have remained as obscure to commentators as Dante found it at the moment. No one, as far as I know, has even fairly tried to find a meaning for it. To me the following appears a not unlikely one. Love is weeping on Dante's account, and not on his own. He says, 'I am the centre of a circle (*Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle*): therefore all lovable objects, whether in heaven or earth, or any part of the circle's circumference, are equally near to me. Not so thou, who will one day lose Beatrice when she goes to heaven.'³

¹ It is so because the number of degrees of the circle, 360, reduce numeralogically to 9. This perhaps relates to the goddess because 'nine' is an element of 'feminine'.

² *Works*, II, 42.

³ *Ibid*, 42-3.

Although this explanation is less than convincing, Rossetti is correct in stating that Love is the centre of the universe and the cause of all things. Dante's meaning, I think, is to be found in the Pythagorean Tetractys if the circumference is represented by nine dots surrounding the tenth, signifying the Cause, at the centre. This is a doubling, as it were, of the quaternity of elements with the quintessence at the centre.¹ This accounts for the symbol of the 'Heart' of the title. The circle with a dot at its centre is both astrologically and alchemically the symbol for the sun. Again we return to the image of the solar wheel.

The second image that springs from the title is an extension of the first. A compass is an instrument for drawing circles. One leg remains constant at the centre, while the other describes the arc of the circumference as it moves around the first. As such it has always been a symbol of the tool by which God the Architect designed the universe. Again, it is a solar-symbol.

The third image is of the other sort of compass, which is circular, and is an instrument for establishing direction. The main features of its dial are the four cardinal points, which, when joined form a cross through the centre, and this, again, forms a model for the universe. This has always been the foundation for the processes of ritual magic, and an example of this is found in *Rose Mary*. The four stations represent an almost limitless number of symbolic correspondences. One set of these relate to time, and more specifically, to the wheel of the solar year, as I have demonstrated earlier. This plays an important part in the fertility rituals and in the life and death cycle of both the sun and vegetation. Again, we return to the symbol of the sun, and here we should bear in mind that the compass is the basis of the sundial, in which spatial direction and time are united in a model of the universe.²

Heart's Compass brings together a concise collection of ideas. We are presented with the image of the circle of the material universe, Nature, divided into the four cardinal points of time and space, which form a cross through the centre, at which point

¹ This is the symbolism of the Celtic and Rosicrucian crosses.

² The sundial is a symbol of the conflation of the Sun and Love in Rossetti's art, as in *The Stream's Secret* and *Beata Beatrix*. Surprisingly, Rossetti paints it incorrectly in *Beata Beatrix* and *La Pia*, placing the gnomon in the wrong position relative to the dial.

resides the Heart of Love, '*Amor che muove ile sole e l'altre stelle*'.¹ This is an image of the Rose-Cross, 'the meaning of all things that are'. The 'heart' of the 'compass' is the Rose at the heart of the cross.

Yea, by thy hand the Love-god rends apart
All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art;
Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above.²

The eyes of the beloved, we are told in the octave, perform their own magical function:

Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,
Being of its furthest fires oracular;-
The evident heart of all life is sown and mown.

Thus the heart at the centre of all things, is the heart of the Goddess, 'and is thy name not Love?' This at least supplies an answer to the riddle upon which *The House of Life* concludes in *The One Hope*:

Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er
But only the one Hope's one name be there, -
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.

In Sonnet 29, *The Moonstar*, we are presented with the precise relationship in which the beloved stands to the Goddess:

Lady, I thank thee for thy loveliness,
Because my lady is more lovely still.
Glorying I gaze, and yield with glad goodwill

¹ It is perhaps wise to point out here that in both Platonism and Rosicrucianism, the sun stands as a *material* symbol of the divine Truth, and is not the Truth itself. This is why it is moved by Love, which is that Truth.

² These eyes also have a symbolic function, as Bruno explains: 'the two stars do not mean the two eyes which are in the forehead, but the two appreciable kinds of divine beauty and goodness, of that infinite splendour, which so influences intellectual and rational desire, that it brings him to a condition of infinite aspiration': *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 160.

To thee thy tribute; by whose sweet-spun dress
Of delicate life Love labours to assess
My lady's absolute queendom; saying, 'Lo!
How high this beauty is, which yet doth show
But as that beauty's sovereign votaress.'

Lady, I saw thee with her, side by side;
And as, when night's fair fires their queen surround,
An emulous star too near the moon will ride, -
Even so thy rays within her luminous bound
Were traced no more; and by the light so drown'd,
Lady, not thou but she was glorified.

This follows a well established convention within mediaeval and Renaissance literature.
A good example is given by Bruno:

therefore, the principal lesson that Love gives to him is, that he contemplate the
divine beauty in shadow, when he cannot do so in the mirror, and, like the
suitors of Penelope, he entertain himself with the maids when he is not permitted
to converse with the mistress.¹

In *The Apology of the Nolan to the Most Virtuous and Lovely Ladies*, - 'O lovely,
graceful nymphs of England!' - we see the same idea expressed as in Rossetti's sonnet:
'For here we see the one, the great Diana, / Who is to you as sun amongst the stars.'²

In Sonnet 33, - and here we should not ignore the significance of the number (3x3=9)
- *Venus Victrix*, the poet places himself in the position of Paris. Here, the Goddess is
expressed as a trinity representing justice, wisdom, and beauty. Bruno represents these
three qualities in the figure of a sphere, in which all dimensions are equal, but are
contained in one unity. This is the prize of Venus: 'Therefore to her should be
consecrated the spherical apple as to her who seems to be all in all'.³ His message is

¹ Ibid, I, 73.

² Ibid, I, 171.

³ Ibid, I, 158.

that the true Goddess contains the sum of all these aspects. Thus she is 'the meaning of all things that are'.

The three goddesses Juno, Pallas Minerva, and Venus represent three Platonic ideas, as Bruno interprets them:

Thou knowest that, as the Platonic ideas are divided into three species, of which one tends to the contemplative or speculative life, one to active morality, and the third to the idle and voluptuous, so are there three species of love, of which one raises itself from the contemplation of bodily form to the consideration of the spiritual and divine; the other only continues in the delight of seeing and conversing; the third from seeing proceeds to precipitate into the concupiscence of touch. ...some aim at enjoying, and they are incited to pluck the apple from the tree of corporeal beauty. ... others put before themselves the fruit of delight, which they take in the aspect of the beauty and grace of the spirit, which glitters and shines in the beauty of the body, and certain of these, although they love the body and greatly desire to be united to it, bewailing its absence and being afflicted by separation, at the same time fear, lest presuming in this they may be deprived of that affability, conversation, friendship, and sympathy which are most precious to them.¹

There could be no better description of Rossetti's relationship with Jane Morris as displayed in his poetry and letters than the latter part of this quotation. EH Gombrich expands the meaning:

In the allegorical reading of the story, the triumph of Venus in the dumbshow² would not be read as a mere decorative frill or a digression. It would be taken to foreshadow this final appearance of the Goddess. The judgement of Paris itself was traditionally read in the light of moral allegory. It rivalled the story of Hercules as an example of the moral choice before man. In the commentary to Apuleius, written by Beroaldus towards the end of the *quattrocento*, the passage

¹ Ibid, I, 65-7.

² In Apuleius's *Golden Ass*.

is explained by a reference to Fulgentius, according to whom the scene signifies the human choice between the three forms of life, contemplative, active or voluptuous. We know that Ficino accepted this interpretation, but in his bias for the Goddess of Love he contrived to give it a different twist. In a dedication of Plato's *Philebus* to Lorenzo il Magnifico - written, it is true, many years later - he commends his patron for not having drawn upon himself the wrath of any of the three Goddesses by rejecting her. Rather had he chosen all three of them, the wisdom of Minerva, the power of Juno and the grace, poetry and music of Venus.¹

The importance of dwelling so long on this allegory becomes clear when we connect it with Rossetti's trinity of sonnets, Sonnets 71-73, entitled *The Choice*. Here we see that he is complying with this Platonic scheme: Sonnet 71 represents the choice of voluptuousness, Sonnet 72 represents the active choice, and Sonnet 73 represents the choice of contemplation. At first sight, it might be argued that the significance of the last two should be transposed, but in fact the message of Sonnet 72, although stressing the need to 'watch', is one of active evangelism, while Sonnet 73, for all its images of movement towards the goal, emphasises the need to ponder the questions that action brings. Sonnet 72 was almost certainly influenced by the attendance of the Rossetti women at Christ Church, in Albany Street, which became a centre of the Oxford Movement in London. Here, the Reverend William Dodsworth, a disciple of Pusey with strong millenarian enthusiasms, preached very much in the style this sonnet describes; so much so that Rossetti almost quotes his words: 'Take ye heed, watch and pray, for you know not when the time is'.²

I wish to touch briefly on two other examples of Classical thought in Rossetti's verse. Closely related to the theme of *The Choice*, though expressing a dualistic choice rather than a triune, Sonnet 90, *Retro Me, Sathana*, seems to me to draw its striking imagery from Plato's representation of the soul as a charioteer in *Phaedrus*: 'Let our figure be of a composite nature - a pair of winged horses and a charioteer'.³ Sonnet 67,

¹ 'Botticelli's Mythologies' in *Symbolic Images*, p.54.

² Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p.97.

³ *Phaedrus*, p.61. 'Now the winged horses and the charioteer of the gods are all of them noble, and of noble breed, while ours are mixed; and we have a charioteer who drives them in a pair, and one of them

The Landmark, has its basis in a similar idea of forked direction and purpose, which seem to express the idea of the Pythagorean 'Y', which, like Plato's black and white horses, represents the right and wrong choice of paths in any course of action.¹

Another source is found in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, where Galahad and Melias encounter a cross at a fork in their road, upon which is inscribed:

Give heed, thou knight that goest about seeking adventure: behold two roads,
one to thy left, the other to thy right. The left-hand road thou shalt not take, for
he that enters therein must be second to none if he would follow it to the end:
and if thou take the right-hand road, haply thou mayest soon perish.²

In *Venus Victrix*, it is hardly surprising that Rossetti, prompted by Love, should choose Venus, who presents herself to him in her material, worldly, and ultimately destructive form as the beloved - 'Helen' - as his reward. For Rossetti, 'the choice' is hardly a choice at all, for as he tells us in Sonnet 77, *Soul's Beauty*, he is 'The allotted bondman' of the Goddess.

In Sonnet 36, it is life itself that is the gift of the Goddess / beloved, a truth which is at once both actual and metaphorical:

Not in thy body is thy life at all,
But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes;
Through these she yields thee life that vivifies
What else were sorrow's servant and death's thrall.

This is again expressed in Sonnet 56, *True Woman: Herself*;

To be a sweetness more desired than Spring;
A bodily beauty more acceptable

is noble and of noble origin, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble origin; and as might be expected, there is a great deal of trouble in managing them.'

¹ The Pythagorean 'Y' appears in seventeenth century political and Rosicrucian propaganda: see plate 16 in Frances Yates's *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. In *The Chemical Wedding*, Christian Rosencreutz is presented with a four-fold choice of paths to the nuptials.

² *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. by PM Matarasso (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), p.66.

Than the wild rose-tree's arch that crowns the fell;
To be an essence more environing
Than wine's drained juice; a music ravishing
More than the passionate pulse of Philomel; -
To be all this 'neath one soft bosom's swell
That is the flower of life: - how strange a thing!

How strange a thing to be what Man can know
But as a sacred secret! Heaven's own screen
Hides hers soul's purest depth and loveliest glow;
Closely withheld, as all things most unseen, -
The wave-bowered pearl, - the heart-shaped seal of green
That flecks the snowdrop underneath the snow.

This must be one of the most beautiful and purest of all Rossetti's hymns to the eternal Goddess. In it we find many of the symbols we have so-far encountered; Spring, the rose-tree, the essence of 'wine's drained juice' (a symbol of rapture and enlightenment as well as of the sacrament¹), music, and 'the flower of life'. The sestet tells us that these are symbols of a 'sacred secret': the capitalisation of 'Man' tells us that they belong to humanity as a whole rather than to the specific individuality of the poet alone. That these things are hidden represents the veil of the Goddess.² For the 'True Woman' here is the veil that separates the beloved from the Goddess, who alone represents the ultimate 'Truth'. Christina's poem *Within the Veil* presents just such a vision, one very similar in imagery to *The Blessed Damozel*:

She holds a lily in her hand,
Where long ranks of Angels stand:
A silver lily for her wand.

¹ Besides Christ being a type of Bacchus, the grape had earlier been a symbol of the Goddess, along with all other fruits of the earth, most notably (and in Masonic terms), wheat and the olive. The process of fermentation which turns grape juice to wine symbolises the transformation the godhead works in the soul to produce the spiritual intoxication of transcendence. Thus Christ declares his purpose with his first miracle at the wedding at Cana, in which he turns the water (of life) into wine (of the spirit).

² Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* was one attempt to reveal the universal nature of this mystery.

All her hair falls sweeping down,
Her hair that is a golden brown,
A crown beneath her golden crown.

Blooms a rose bush at her knee,
Good to smell and good to see:
It bears a rose for her, for me:

Her rose a blossom richly grown,
My rose a bud not fully blown
But sure one day to be mine own.¹

While the motif of the snowdrop represents nature's rebirth hidden beneath the obscurity of death (winter's snow), the emblem of the pearl can be traced back to *The Testament of Love*, a fourteenth century prose work by Thomas Usk.² It is perhaps worth noting the similarity between this title and Rossetti's *Love's Testament*. In this work, Usk defines the precise relationship between the woman and that to which she points: 'It is true that Margaryte sometimes ceases to be a woman and becomes a pearl':

How was it, that sightful manna in deserte to children of Israel was spiritual meate? Bodily also it was, for mennes bodies it norissheth; and yet never the later Christ it signified. Right so a jewel betokeneth a gemme, and that is a stone vertuous or els a perle. Margaryte, a woman, betokeneth grace, lerning, or wisdom of god, or els holy church.³

Margaryte, the pearl of wisdom, falls into the category of allegorical heroines first established by the troubadours, a tradition that culminates in Beatrice. Dante uses the

¹ *New Poems*, p.250.

² There is also an anonymous mediaeval poem entitled *The Pearl*. Browning wrote a late poem (pub. 1889) entitled *A Pearl, A Girl*, in which the pearl / girl is the medium of a transcendental experience. In a companion poem, *Summum Bonum* (also the title of an alchemical text attributed to Fludd), Browning also uses pearl imagery. Both poems have alchemical (if not Rosicrucian) overtones.

³ Lewis, op. cit., pp.223-4.

symbolism of the pearl to describe Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*: 'She hath that paleness of the pearl that's fit / In a fair woman, so much and not more'.¹ Her spiritual form, as in the manna, was not separate from the bodily.²

It is worth mentioning here an alchemical treatise entitled *Pretiosa Margarita Novella, The New Pearl of Great Price*, published in Venice in 1546. This work, edited by Janus Lacinius of Calabria, is a collection of earlier works, and takes its title from 'an introduction to alchemy written by Petrus Bonus of Pola in 1330'.³ Alchemically, the Pearl symbolises the Stone of Philosophers, that is, the agent through which base metals are transmuted. It would seem that Rossetti uses this as a metaphor for Jane, who represents the power by which he is himself spiritually transfigured.

In one of Rossetti's finest poems, *Three Shadows*, the symbol of the pearl is reached through three successive penetrations into the mystery: in the first stanza, the poet enters through the eyes of the beloved, 'As a traveller sees the stream / In the shadow of the wood'; in the second stanza, the poet enters into the heart of the beloved, 'As a seeker sees the gold / In the shadow of the stream'; in the third, he enters into the mystery of love in the heart of the beloved, 'As a diver sees the pearl / In the shadow of the sea'.⁴ The 'wave bowered pearl' is of course the moon, Pearl of the Heavens, and Queen of the Waters. In these images, Rossetti uses the symbol of the pearl as a metaphor of light hidden in darkness.

In 1871, Rossetti produced a pastel drawing of Jane entitled *Perlascura*.⁵ In 1877, an autotype of this drawing was being produced which did not comply with Rossetti's standards. The importance that Rossetti attached to detail is evident in this letter to Frederick Shields who was connected with the company producing the print:

I heard to-day that the profile autotype is being sold with the title of *The Black Pearl*. *Perlascura* was the name I gave it, and if any other is given, it must really be at once withdrawn from circulation. I am extremely vexed about the matter if

¹ *Works*, II, 55.

² Rossetti stresses this point in a footnote to his translation of the *Vita Nuova*: 'I believe [this] to lie at the heart of all true Dantesque commentary; that is, the existence always of the actual events even where the allegorical superstructure has been raised by Dante himself': *Works*, II, 89.

³ Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, pp.55-8. Waite edited a version of this work published in 1894.

⁴ Rossetti possessed a Japanese picture entitled *Female Pearl Diver Attacked by Fishes*: *Letters*, II, 594, letter 672, to James Anderson Rose, 22 Feb. 1866.

⁵ Surtees Cat. no. 225, plate 323.

true. The right translation would be *The Dark Pearl*, but no translation is needed.¹

In the next sonnet of the sequence, *True Woman: Her Love*, the image of the lover and the beloved is as of the sun and the moon; 'Passion in her is / A glass facing his fire, where the bright bliss / Is mirrored, and the heat returned'. This image has an affinity with the following passage by Pico della Mirandola, and prepares the way for the next sonnet:

As he who by moonlight seeth some fair object, desires to view and enjoy it more fully in the day; so the Minde, weakly beholding in herself the Ideal Beauty dim and opacuous [which our author calls 'the skreen of a dark shade'] by reason of the night of her imperfection, turns (like the moon) to the eternal Sun to perfect her Beauty by him; to whom addressing herself she becomes Intelligible light; clearing the beauty of Celestial Venus and rendering it visible to the eye of the first Minde.²

The sestet portrays their union - the sacred marriage of sun and moon - which results in the third sonnet, *True Woman: Her Heaven*. In this sonnet, the veil has been lifted to reveal the true identity of the Beloved. Here is portrayed the timeless sanctuary that is Paradise Regained; one may imagine this to be the rose-garden of embracing lovers in the painting of *The Blessed Damozel*:

If to grow old in Heaven is to grow young,
 (As the Seer³ saw and said,) then blest were he
 With youth for evermore, whose heaven should be
True Woman, she whom these weak notes have sung.
Here and hereafter, - choir-strains of her tongue, -

¹ *Letters*, IV, 1536, no. 1851, Autumn 1877. In a footnote to this, the editors add that this drawing was first entitled *Twilight*, 'but a day or two later he wrote: "I have thought of another name for the profile head, *Perlascura* (i.e. dark pearl, as an Italian female name). What think you? The name is exact for complexion."' It is worth noting that Rossetti's original title for the poem *Love Lily* was *Dark Lily*: the light/dark symbolism again being evident.

² Robb, p.120.

³ Swedenborg.

Sky-spaces of her eyes, - sweet signs that flee
About her soul's immediate sanctuary, -
Were Paradise all uttermost worlds among.

The sunrise blooms and withers on the hill
Like any hillflower; and the noblest troth
Dies here to dust. Yet shall Heaven's promise clothe
Even yet those lovers who have cherished still
This test for love: - in every kiss sealed fast
To feel the first kiss and forebode the last.

In both these sonnets Rossetti uses a Rosicrucian symbol to denote temporal lapse; 'Yet as morn springs or twilight sinks to rest', and 'The sunrise blooms and withers on the hill / Like any hillflower'. Yet the promise beyond this, for those who may endure the test of apparent reality, is the reward of a timeless permanence in which youth and love do not fade 'like any hillflower'.

The Goddess of the Trees.

Thou, throned in every heart's elect alcove,
And crowned with garlands culled from every tree,
Which for no head but thine, by Love's decree,
All beauties and all mysteries interwove.

Sonnet 32, *Equal Troth*.

Rossetti's seal, with which his Cheyne Walk notepaper was stamped, was similar in shape to his depiction of the coin in the illustration of *The Sonnet*, consisting of two connected roundels. Similarly, I believe, it displayed his symbolic self. The right-hand roundel contained his monogram, and the left hand roundel shows a tree surrounded by the motto *Frangas non flectas*, 'Break Not Bend'. His monogram, with which he

signed his paintings, is often painted in red, and is designed to represent a rose. The design of the tree and the motto derived from a crest inherited from Gabriele and in Rossetti's words, 'the tree on this letter-paper was supposed possibly, though not very certainly, to be the arms of our family.'¹ Although the tree in question is unidentifiable, it may well represent a rose-tree as a play on the name Rossetti. The motto reverses the line in Rossetti's translation of Bonaggiunta Urbicani's sonnet *Of Wisdom and Foresight in Dante and his Circle*,² 'Better thy will should bend than thy life break'. Bruno also takes the opposite view: 'The soul nor yields nor bends to these rough blows'.³ Using the symbolic device of the oak-tree buffeted by strong winds he makes a spiritual point:

From this may be understood what is according to us the perfection of firmness; not in this, that the tree neither bends nor breaks, nor is rent, but in that it does not so much as stir, and its prototype keeps spirit, sense, and intellect, fixed there, where the shock of the tempest is not felt.⁴

In stanza 3, *Oak Tree*, of William Morris's *The Forest*, is the line 'Unmoved I stand what wind may blow'. Whether the tree of the seal is a rose-tree or an oak, Rossetti certainly attached a symbolic significance in later life to any events concerning trees, treating these as omens and portents concerning his own destiny, as Watts-Dunton recalls:

When a party of us - including Mrs Rossetti, Christina, the two aunts, Dr Hake, with four of his sons, and myself - were staying for Christmas with Gabriel near Bognor, a tree fell in the garden during a storm. While Gabriel seemed inclined to take it as a sign of future disaster, Christina, whose poetry is full of symbolism, would smile at such a notion.⁵

¹ *Letters*, II, 602, letter 686, to his mother, 24th Aug. 1866. Fn.1: 'WMR disclaimed any knowledge of armorial bearings possessed by the Rossetti family.' See also II, 490, letter 505 & fn., and p.493, letter 507.

² *Works*, II, 314: this originally appeared in Part I of *The Early Italian Poets*, 1861: Rossetti later reversed the order of Parts I and II, and retitled the work.

³ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 151.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁵ *Old Familiar Faces*, p.186.

Joan Rees points out Rossetti's influence on the fiction of Thomas Hardy,¹ and indeed the intense and brooding moods of nature that form so intrinsic a 'character' in the work of both writers suggest a kinship. It is therefore of interest to note that a similar superstition figures in Hardy's *The Woodlanders*.²

The gale that destroyed the trees at Aldwick Lodge, Bognor, prompted the composition of Sonnet 89, *The Trees of the Garden*, in which the poet questions the unquestionable:

Ye who have passed Death's haggard hills; and ye
Whom trees that knew your sires shall cease to know
And still stand silent: - is it all a show, -
A wisp that laughs upon the wall?³ - decree
Of some inexorable supremacy
Which ever, as man strains his blind surmise
From depth to ominous depth, looks past his eyes,
Sphinx-faced with unabashed augury?

Nay, rather question the Earth's self. Invoke
The storm-felled forest-trees moss-grown to-day
Whose roots are hillocks where the children play;
Or ask the silver sapling 'neath what yoke
Those stars, his spray-crown's clustering gems, shall wage
Their journey still when his boughs shrink with age.

¹ *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, pp.197-8. Rees here shows that Hardy's character Robert Trewe, in the story *An Imaginative Woman*, was based on Rossetti.

² Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition (London, Papermack, 1987), p.681, records examples of such superstitions in a section entitled 'The External Soul in Plants': 'Further it has been shown that in folk-tales the life of a person is sometimes so bound up with the life of a plant that the withering of the plant will immediately follow or be followed by the death of the person'. Frazer has so much to say on the mythologies in this thesis, that I can only refer the interested reader to his work, either in the complete or the abridged versions.

³ Compare with Son 18; 'Than doth this sovereign face, whose love-spell breathes / Even from its shadowed contour on the wall.'

The gloom of this sonnet requires no comment. Rossetti approaches the trees as an oracle that will pronounce his own doom - 'The trees wave their heads with an omen to tell'.¹ This is also shown in this letter to Watts-Dunton from Aldwick Lodge:

The fine elm-tree in the centre of the lawn is uprooted and the cows are feeding on its prostrate branches. Tomorrow it will be cleared away and leave a blank. When I took my house at Chelsea, a large tree - one of the finest in the walk - (in front of my gate) fell after I had been there a month or two. When I settled at Kelmscott three of the tercentenary trees of the avenue toppled over one another and lay headlong - I think you were there at the time; and now this tree here, the feature of the view, is gone as soon as I arrive!²

There can be no doubt that Rossetti is associating his own fate with that of the trees, especially in connection with his seal and motto, 'Break Not Bend'. This is illustrated in his translation of *The Leaf*, from Leopardi:

'Torn from the parent bough,
Poor leaf all withered now,
Where go you?' 'I cannot tell.
Storm-stricken is the oak-tree
Where I grew, whence I fell'.³

Apart from this personal symbolism, trees have an important place in Rossetti's art. This may have its basis in the Tree of Life in Eden, which may perhaps represent a sort of counterpart, or archetype, to his own *House of Life*. In many of his poems, the motif of tree, forest, grove, glade, and bower forms a constant backdrop for the action. These range from the darkest of images, as for example in *Willowwood*, or the 'dark growths' of 'Some shadowy palpitating grove' in Sonnet 39, *Sleepless Dreams*, to Love's bright 'bower of unimagined flower and tree' in Sonnet 8, *Love's Lovers*. I have shown earlier

¹ *The Song of the Bower*, stanza 4.

² *Letters*, III, 1371, letter 1616, 14th Nov. 1875. The date on this letter shows that Watts-Dunton's recollection of the event occurring at Christmas was erroneous, unless the tale was being related among the guests, as it may well have been.

³ *Works*, II, 409.

in my notes on Sonnets 1 and 2, how the motif of the grove bears an intimate connection with the rituals of sacred marriage and sacrifice in the ancient fertility cults. Perhaps the best example is the Goddess of the Trees in *The Orchard Pit*:

In the soft dell, among the apple-trees,
High up above the hidden pit she stands,
And there for ever sings, who gave to these,
That lie below, her magic hour of ease,
And those her apples holden in their hands. (St.2)

Following the allegorical tradition, the narrator apprehends his vision in a dream: 'Men tell me that sleep has many dreams; but all my life I have dreamt one dream alone'. The prose version of this tale describes the dream thus:

I see a glen whose sides slope upward from the deep bed of a dried-up stream,¹ and either slope is covered with wild apple-trees. In the largest tree, within the fork whence the limbs divide, a fair, golden-haired woman stands and sings, with one white arm stretched along a branch of the tree, and with the other holding forth a bright red apple, as if to some one coming down the slope. Below her feet the trees grow more and more tangled, and stretch from both sides across the deep pit below: and the pit is full of the bodies of men.²

This image was depicted by Rossetti in his designs for the Oxford Union mural in 1857. Rossetti was at this time fully immersed in mediaevalism, along with Burne-Jones and Morris, and his design, entitled *Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael*³ (Fig.8), was ostensibly taken from Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Rossetti wrote:

My own subject...is Sir Launcelot prevented by his sin from entering the chapel of the Sanc Grail. He has fallen asleep before the shrine full of angels, and,

¹ It is interesting to note that, in this image of death, the stream - which is always mythologically connected to the Tree of Life - is dry, while that in Son. 82, *Hoarded Joy*, in which the tree which is laden with the abundant fruits, 'sees in the stream its own fecundity'.

² *Works*, II, 427.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 93. Oxford Union Library.

between him and it, rises in his dream the image of Queen Guenevere, the cause of all. She stands gazing at him with her arms extended in the branches of an apple tree.¹

The model for Guinevere appears, significantly, to be Jane Burden, whom Rossetti 'discovered' that summer, while the Angel of the Grail in the same picture is undeniably a portrait of Lizzie. There could surely be no clearer portent of the future than this. The model for Lancelot was Burne-Jones.² The meaning of the picture is explained by Coventry Patmore: 'The Queen while she regards Lancelot has her arms among the branches of an apple-tree - apparently to remind us of man's first temptation'.³ He might as well have substituted 'Rossetti's', here, for 'man's'. It is also of interest that precisely the same image appears in Swinburne's *Lancelot*, which describes Queen Guenevere standing against the tree surrounded by 'golden-great' apples. So close is this imagery to that of Rossetti's designs that it seems both men were intimately involved with the same symbolic idea.

It is not my intention to discuss here the Arthurian aspects of Rossetti's painting, but rather its symbolic associations with *The Orchard Pit*. It is obvious that painting, poem, and prose evoke the same figure; 'She [who] stands over them in the glen, and sings forever, and offers her apple still'. Who is this temptress of man's fall? The obvious answer is Eve. But she is not simply Eve. She is also Venus with her apple, and beyond this, she is the White Goddess, the Moon:

Then we stood on the margin of the slope, with the apple-trees beneath us; and the moon bade the clouds fall from her and sat in her throne like the sun at noon-day: and none of the apple-trees were bare now, though autumn was far worn, but fruit and blossom covered them together.⁴

¹ *Letters*, I, 337, letter 287, to Charles Eliot Norton, July 1858.

² Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols (London: Lund Humphries, 1993), II, 258, records that Burne-Jones's late painting *The Dream of Launcelot* 'may have been commemorative, for the lines of the two compositions have much in common'.

³ Faxon, *DGR*, p.107.

⁴ *Works*, II, 430.

This cruel Goddess is the same heartless Lilith of Rossetti's painting, and here she lures the dreamer away from his earthly love and into her snare:

And now the Siren's song rose clearer as I went. At first she sang, 'Come to Love;' and of the sweetness of Love she said many things. And next she sang, 'Come to Life;' and Life was sweet in her song. But long before I reached her, she knew that all her will was mine: and then her voice rose softer than ever, and her words were, 'Come to Death;' and Death's name in her mouth was the very swoon of all sweetest things that be. And then my path cleared; and she stood over against me in the fork of the tree I knew so well, blazing now like a lamp beneath the moon. And one kiss I had of her mouth, as I took the apple from her hand.¹

In this passage, the Siren precisely presents the three aspects of the Moon that we first encountered in *The Sonnet*; Life, Love, and Death. Here, however, the order is changed, and Life seems to be the result of Love, and Death the gift of Love. This is the sequence we have followed earlier in *The House of Life*. In this tale, however, Death is not a glorious transformation, but simply, Doom. Rossetti's romance appears to be nothing more than a tale of the supernatural told with relish. But behind it lies the symbolism of myth, and the truth of this fiction is that the Goddess of Life is also the Goddess of Death. Diana the Huntress. La Belle Dame sans Merci. The moral is that Beauty and Love may be as destructive as they are creative, a fact of which the ancients were all too aware. The gift of the apple caused the destruction of Troy.

Morris's poem *Pomona* illustrates his awareness of the dual character of the Goddess, and the first line of the second stanza reminds us of the imagery of Rossetti's *Three Shadows*:

I am the ancient Apple-Queen
As once I was so am I now.
For evermore a hope unseen
Betwixt the blossom and the bough.

¹ Ibid.

Ah, where's the river's hidden Gold!
 And where the windy grave of Troy?
 Yet come as I came of old,
 From out the heart of Summer's joy.¹

Rossetti's depiction of the Apple-goddess as the Death-goddess shows that his knowledge of mythology is far from superficial: it is worth taking a quick look at the background from which he was drawing, as it forms a constant thread that runs throughout his work. The mythology surrounding the apple, the apple-tree, and the Apple-goddess runs throughout occidental culture. We are all aware of the story of the Fall, but less aware that this is as much a corruption of an earlier myth, as is that of Paris.² The apple-tree is almost universally the symbol of wisdom and immortality, and the apple, conferred by the Goddess, was a gift of those qualities which enabled man to enter Paradise. The Garden of the Hesperides contained the tree of golden apples which was guarded by a serpent and tended by the Triple-goddess in the form of three maidens. Avalon, the Celtic Isle of the Blessed, or Tir-nan-og, the land of perpetual youth, was the apple-isle to which Arthur was taken by the three queens after his last battle. Merlin had an apple-tree and a pet pig, both of which are symbols of the Goddess.³ Eve, the Mother of All Living, was the original Moon-goddess who tended the Tree of Knowledge and who conferred the apple of wisdom and immortality upon her son Adam.⁴ But the Mother-goddess Diana, whose festivals were celebrated by the

¹ From *Poems by the Way*; the poems among which it appears are a celebration of Nature, in which the seasons, forest trees, etc., play a symbolic part. There is a parable-like quality to these verses which wrap man in the weave of natural rhythms and fecundity. It is of interest here that Morris's Red House was built within an ancient orchard.

² Graves points out, *White Goddess*, p. 257, that 'To award an apple to the Love-goddess would have been an impertinence on the Shepherd's part. All apples were hers. ... Obviously the three Goddesses are, as usual, the three persons of the ancient Triple-goddess, not jealous rivals, and obviously the Love-goddess is giving the apple to the Shepherd (or goatherd), not receiving it from him. It is the apple of immortality and he is the young Dionysus...'

³ Druids, of which Merlin was an example, were known as 'boars', because boars feed on the acorns of the oak-groves of which they were the custodians. Boars also eat and get intoxicated on the windfall apples of the sacred apple-tree, which involves the same symbolic meaning as that of the sacrament. There is also probably a secondary meaning in that the Great Goddess often took the symbolic form of a white sow (retaining this image even as late as the alchemical illustration), with the implication that it was the Druidical priest who administered to her.

⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991), p.17, writes: 'there is consequently an ambivalence inherent in many of the basic symbols of the Bible

drinking of cider, was also known as Nemesis (from the Greek for 'grove', *nemos*). Diana Nemorensis carries two symbols; in one hand an apple bough, and in the other, a wheel to denote the turning year- that which always returns to its beginning. The feast day of Diana of the Groves (August 13th) became in the Middle Ages the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (August 15th), thus retaining the idea of both immortality and the Virgin as Holy Wisdom.

Graves writes that Nemesis 'carries an apple-bough in one hand, and a wheel in the other... She is a daughter of Oceanus and has something of Aphrodite's beauty'.¹ She 'had been the Nymph-goddess of Death-in-Life'.²

That Nemesis's wheel was originally the solar year is suggested by the name of her Latin counterpart, Fortuna (from *vortumna*, 'she who turns the year about). When the wheel had turned half circle, the sacred king, raised to the summit of his fortune, was fated to die ... but when it came full circle, he revenged himself on the rival who had supplanted him.

In pre-Hellenic myth, the goddess chases the sacred king and, although he goes through his seasonal transformations, counters each of them in turn with her own, and devours him at the summer solstice.

Nemesis is called a daughter of Oceanus, because as the Nymph-goddess with the apple-bough she was also the sea-born Aphrodite...³

Thus in *The Orchard Pit*, Rossetti portrays the Apple-goddess in her form as Nemesis, Diana of the Groves, and the ritual is that of the sacrificial death of her lover, the Year-king.

Another depiction of the Apple-goddess is Rossetti's painting, *A Vision of Fiammetta*, 1878 ⁴ (Fig.9). Although ostensibly a portrait of Boccaccio's beloved, the

that no amount of rhetorical stress on the patriarchal interpretation can suppress. They address a pictorial message to the heart that exactly reverses the verbal message addressed to the brain; and this nervous discord inhabits both Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism, since they too share in the legacy of the Old Testament.' Again, p.25, 'A residue of mystery remains to them; and this, throughout the history of the West, has ever lurked within, and emanated from, the archaic symbols of the later "higher" systems - as though speaking silently, to say, "But do you not hear a deeper song?"'

¹ *Greek Myths*, p.125.

² *Ibid*, p.126. Graves notes, pp.71-2, that this was also a function of Aphrodite: 'As goddess of Death-in-Life, Aphrodite earned many titles which seem inconsistent with her beauty and complaisance.'

³ *Ibid*, pp.126-7.

sonnet Rossetti wrote for the painting clearly indicates that she is the Apple-goddess of Death and Immortality:

Behold Fiammetta, shown in Vision here.
Gloom-girt 'mid Spring-flushed apple-growth she stands;
And as she sways the branches with her hands,
Along her arm the sundered bloom falls sheer,
In separate petals shed, each like a tear;
While from the quivering bough the bird expands
His wings. And lo! thy spirit understands
Life shaken and shower'd and flown, and Death drawn near.

All stirs with change. Her garments beat the air:
The angel circling round her aureole
Shimmers in flight against the tree's grey bole:
While she, with reassuring eyes most fair,
A presage and a promise stands; as 'twere
On Death's dark storm the rainbow of the soul.

This is Rossetti at his most misleading: despite stating 'Behold Fiammetta, shown in vision here', who died young, the symbolism tells us that it is the Love-goddess who is before us: she is seen in a 'Vision', she is aureoled, her garments are crimson, she is accompanied by a crimson dove, she wears a heart-shaped ornament on her wrist, and she appears from out of the apple-tree, 'sway[ing] the branches with her hands'.

Another image of the Apple-goddess appears in *The Sea Spell*, 1877.¹ This was supposedly intended to illustrate Coleridge's lines, 'A damsel with a dulcimer / in a vision once I saw', and was produced as a companion piece for *Veronica Veronese*. No doubt this was merely a sop to Leyland who liked pictures of single figures with a musical theme. Once again, the Apple-goddess is depicted as the siren of Doom, as the sonnet for the picture tells us:

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 252, plate 366. Private collection.

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 248, plate 367. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree,
While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell

She sinks into her spell: and when full soon
Her lips move and she soars into her song,
What creatures of the midmost main shall throng
In furrowed surf-clouds to the summoning rune:
Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,
And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?

Another striking depiction of 'the Goddess of the Trees' is *The Day Dream*, 1880¹ (Fig. 10). While this painting has all the appearance of being an idle idyll with no content other than the poetry of its own imagery, the title alerts us that this is a 'dream' in the mediaeval sense; that is, a vision of a Goddess. This painting is a self-contained parable, in which the Goddess inhabits the Tree of Life itself. She is the manifestation of the anima of the Tree. Frazer writes: 'the tree-spirit is often conceived and represented as detached from the tree and clothed in human form, and even as embodied in living men or women. ... There is an instructive class of cases in which the tree-spirit is represented simultaneously in vegetable form and in human form, which are set side by side as if for the express purpose of explaining each other.'² This painting, together with *The Beloved* and *La Ghirlandata*, constitutes a triadic hymn to Goddess Nature. The tree in which the Goddess sits is a sycamore, which, along with the fig, palm, cypress, apple, and olive, was a tree planted to represent her in her temples around the Mediterranean. The Goddess Isis was known as the 'Lady of the Sycamore'.³ Again, the message of this painting is one of seasonal change and fertility. Rossetti's original

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 259, plate 388. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

² *Golden Bough*, p.125. He continues: 'In these cases the human representative of the tree-spirit is sometimes a doll or puppet, sometimes a living person, but whether a puppet or a person, it is placed beside a tree or bough; so that together the person or puppet, and the tree or bough, form a sort of bilingual inscription, the one being, so to speak, a translation of the other.'

³ Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p.496. Frazer notes, p.376, how the effigy of the dead Osiris was placed in the boughs of a sycamore as part of the fertility rites, symbolising the return of the old dead King to the Goddess.

conception was that it should be entitled *Monna Primavera*, thus representing the return of fecundity to the earth, and that the Goddess should be holding a snowdrop in her hand.¹ This is shown in the original drawing, but it was later changed to a honeysuckle because it would have been incompatible to have shown a snowdrop along with the sycamore in full leaf. This painting may be seen as in some way connected with Sonnet 56, *True Woman: Herself*: 'To be a sweetness more desired than Spring', in which the sestet concludes with the image of the snowdrop, 'the heart-shaped seal of green / That flecks the snowdrop beneath the snow'. The trio of sonnets was written in August 1881, shortly after Rossetti had completed the painting. The use of the honeysuckle is perhaps more suited to the imagery of the painting, being a symbol of sexuality and fertility.

Rossetti's sonnet for this picture adds little to our understanding of the image. Of more importance is the original title, *Monna Primavera*, which it seems a pity Rossetti did not choose to retain. If we look to the *Vita Nuova*, we find there an extension of the meaning:

I saw coming towards me a certain lady who was very famous for her beauty, and of whom that friend whom I have already called the first among my friends had long been enamoured. This lady's right name was Joan; but because of her comeliness (or at least it was so imagined) she was called of many *Primavera* (Spring), and went by that name among them. Then looking again, I perceived that the most noble Beatrice followed after her. And when both these ladies had passed by me, it seemed to me that Love spake again in my heart, saying: 'She that came first was called Spring, only because of that which was to happen on this day. And it was I myself who caused that name to be given her; seeing that as the Spring cometh first in the year, so should she come first on this day, when Beatrice was to show herself after the vision of her servant. And even if thou go about to consider her right name, it is also as one should say, 'She shall come first'; inasmuch as her name, Joan, is taken from that John who went before the True Light, saying '*Ego vox clamantis in deserto: "Parate viam Domini."*' [I

¹ Frazer notes, p.121, that sycamore and hawthorn boughs were used to decorate doorways on May Day, presumably to symbolise the passage of fertility into the new year.

am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord.""]
 And also it seemed to me that he added other words, to wit: 'He who should
 inquire delicately touching this matter, could not but call Beatrice by mine own
 name, which is to say, Love; beholding her so like unto me.'¹

This is a good example of the pageant examined earlier. Joan is playing the role of the earthly surrogate, and Beatrice (whose real nature is heavenly) 'was to show herself after the vision of her servant'. Beatrice is the Goddess of Love herself, as Love proclaims.² This is an example of Dante's feigning; Beatrice is to the Goddess as are those women for whom Dante feigned his love when Beatrice was its true object. Thus Rossetti's image of Spring is she who precedes the deity Venus herself, or rather, in this case, Isis. Jane, in other words, is the Platonic material image of the Goddess. So here, in paint, is the same message that we have already seen within *The House of Life*.

I shall end this section with some stanzas from Swinburne's *Hertha*³ which also celebrates the ancient Goddess of the Trees as the Tree of Life herself. Swinburne understood the true nature of the Goddess who offers the apple of wisdom and immortality. It contains many of the symbols we have been examining:

The tree many-rooted
 That swells to the sky
 With frondage red-fruited,
 The life-tree am I;
 In the buds of your lives is the sap of my leaves: ye
 shall live and not die. (20)

In the spring-coloured hours
 When my mind was as May's
 There brake forth of me flowers
 By centuries of days,

¹ *Works*, II, 68-9.

² Dante is quick to convert this to a Christian context, substituting John and Jesus for Joan and Beatrice. In a sense, this may be seen as a model of the substitution of Christianity for an older religion, which is certainly how the Troubadors would have understood it.

³ Hertha, or Nerthus, was the Teutonic Fertility-goddess, Mother Earth. Nerthus means 'benefactor'.

Strong blossoms with perfume of manhood, shot out
from my spirit as rays. (30)

And the sound of them springing
And smell of their shoots
Were as warmth and sweet singing
And strength to my roots;
And the lives of my children made perfect with
freedom of soul were my fruits. (31)

I bid you but be;
I have need not of prayer;
I have need of you free
As your mouths of mine air;
That my heart may be greater within me, beholding
the fruits of me fair. (32)

For truth only is living,
Truth only is whole,
And the love of his giving
Man's polestar and pole;
Man, pulse of my centre, and fruit of my body, and
seed of my soul. (39)

One birth of my bosom;
One beam of mine eye;
One topmost blossom
That scales the sky;
Man, equal and one with me, man that is made of
me, man that is I. (40)

ROSSETTI AND THE ROSE-CROSS.

PART 1: CIRCLES, CYCLES, AND SYMBOLS.

In the foregoing chapters, I have examined in some detail two of the major components behind Rossetti's art. In this chapter I turn my attention to the third fundamental element governing his imagery - Rosicrucianism. In historical terms the previous influences can be seen as a direct progression of ideas that flowered in Classical times, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. To this may be added a third, the Hermetic Tradition as it manifests itself in mystic alchemy. Although this was essentially a product of the Renaissance, it finds its most identifiable form in the Protestant north in the seventeenth century in the Fraternity of the Most Noble Order of the Rosy Cross.

From the appearance of the first Rosicrucian manifesto, the *Fama*,¹ in 1614, the recurring question has been, Who are the Rosicrucians? Some held - indeed still do - that they did not exist, and that Rosicrucianism was nothing more than an elaborate hoax. The Rosicrucians did exist.² They were courtiers, scholars, scientists - that is, alchemists - and visionaries, in the days when all these roles might easily co-exist. To a degree they might also be described as politicians, but the politics to which they were spiritually committed were the politics of religious and social reform - 'this Reformation which is to come'.³ We have already noted in previous chapters the importance placed on the spiritual return to Eden (or Paradise)⁴; in mundane terms this takes the form of a specific vision of a Utopian society. The alleviation of human suffering, sickness,

¹ *Fama Fraternitatis, or a Discovery of the Fraternity of the Most Noble Order of the Rosy Cross*, Cassel, 1614.

² See Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* for a detailed and scholarly examination of their existence and influence.

³ *Confessio Fraternitatis, or the Confession of the Laudable Fraternity of the Most Honourable Order of the Rosy Cross, Written to all the Learned of Europe*, Cassel, 1615. This, and the foregoing manifesto are reproduced in full in *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, pp.238-260 (p.256). '...although we might enrich the whole world, and endue them with learning, and might release it from innumerable miseries, yet shall we never be manifested and made known unto any man': p.260.

⁴ 'We ought therefore here to observe well, and make it known unto everyone, that God hath certainly and most assuredly concluded to send and grant to the world before her end, which presently thereupon shall ensue, such a truth, light, life and glory, as the first man Adam had, which he lost in Paradise, after which his successors were put and driven, with him, to misery': *Confessio*, *ibid*, p.256. This is the Rosicrucian vision of *apocatastasis* noted earlier.

poverty, and ignorance was another specific and proclaimed aim. In the nineteenth century, precisely this vision of social reform can be seen expressed in the work of such men as Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris.¹ The Rosicrucianism emphasis on the Apocalyptic vision had its counterpart in the millenarianism of the Victorian Anglican High Church.

The evolution of ideas which resulted in the Rosicrucian movement has been studied by Frances Yates in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 1964, and *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 1972. My main concern here is to focus on the symbolic ideas behind the movement, and here again, one encounters two difficulties. The first is that the Rosicrucians have always been a secret society and their creed (if it may so be described), is even today remarkably hard to establish. The second is that Rosicrucianism has undergone several profound changes in emphasis since the seventeenth century, and consequently has meant different things to different people at different times.

The original form of Rosicrucianism may be described as being a distinctly Protestant Christian form of magico-alchemical mysticism, directly derived from the Renaissance Neoplatonic Hermetic-Cabalistic traditions established by Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno. To this should be added the magical influence of Cornelius Agrippa and John Dee, the medico-magical practices of Paracelsus, and the Christian mysticism of Jacob Boehme. The Order itself had six simple rules, as proclaimed in the *Fama*: 1) To cure the sick without reward; 2) Not to wear distinguishing clothes, but to wear the clothes of the country they were in; 3) Once a year to gather in the House of the Holy Spirit; 4) Each Brother was to look for someone to succeed him after his death; 5) 'The Word CR should be their seal, mark, and character'; 6) 'The Fraternity should remain secret one hundred years'.

¹ Both Ruskin and Morris acknowledge the profound influence of Carlyle upon them. Morris's socialist ideal is best expressed in his writings, which can only be described as a Utopian vision in the true Rosicrucian mould. His active politics, I think, were ultimately a fruitless and debased form of this vision, which continually frustrated him. Although Ruskin wisely avoided politics, his Guild of St George actively strove to put his Utopian vision into practice. John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (London: JM Dent, 1982), p.422, note 2, writes: 'The loss of paradise quickly becomes a leitmotif in Ruskin's imagery. The theological insistence upon the imperfections of human life, the ruination of the Garden of Eden, encountered and adumbrated on each daily Bible reading, became a matter of conviction that permeated all of Ruskin's thinking'. Carlyle's *Past and Present* was also of great influence upon Ford Madox Brown as exemplified in *Work*. Ruskin, Rossetti, and Brown all freely gave their time to teach at the Working Men's College, founded by Carlyle's friend, the Christian Socialist FD Maurice, who is pictured standing beside Carlyle in *Work*.

The original Order did not last more than a few years, being swept away during the Thirty Years War. England then became the main centre of Rosicrucianism under the influence of the Hermetic philosopher Robert Fludd. Towards the middle of the century, (c. 1646), we have the first record of English Freemasonry. De Quincey was much later to insist, 'That Free-masonry is neither more nor less than Rosicrucianism as modified by those who transplanted it into England.'¹

The work of Rossetti's father Gabriele, who was both a revolutionary and a Freemason, involved a great deal of material on secret societies and the transmission of the esoteric sciences. This included the whole area of comparative religion, mythologies and heresies, and the transmission of the mythologies of the Masonic tradition. Although Rossetti declared that his father's work was little more than nonsense,² Watts-Dunton added:

There is, perhaps, no more striking instance of the inscrutable lines in which ancestral characteristics descend than the way in which the passion for symbolism was inherited by Christina and Gabriel Rossetti from their father.³

Although Rossetti may have had little sympathy with the approach of his father, a rich vein of esoteric symbolism is evident within his own work. Much of Gabriele's work falls precisely into the category delineated by Frances Yates:

The main reason why serious historical studies of the Rosicrucian manifestos and their influence have hitherto been on the whole lacking is no doubt because the whole subject has been bedevilled by enthusiasts for secret societies. There is a vast literature on Rosicrucianism which assumes the existence of a secret society, founded by Christian Rosencreutz, and having a continuous existence up to modern times. In the vague and inaccurate world of so-called 'occultist' writing this assumption has produced a kind of literature which deservedly sinks below the notice of the serious historian. And when, as is often the case, the misty

¹ 'Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origin of the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons', in *Collected Writings*, XIII, 384-448 (p.420).

² 'Gabriel could speak of his father's symbolizing (as in "La Beatrice di Dante") as being absolutely and hopelessly eccentric and worthless': *Old Familiar Faces*, p.186.

³ Ibid.

discussion of 'Rosicrucians' and their history becomes involved with the masonic myths, the enquirer feels that he is sinking helplessly into a bottomless bog.¹

AE Waite makes the same point even more strongly than Yates:

Perhaps there has never been a realm of inquiry which has been colonised to such an extent by fools and knaves of speculation. If there has been one other it is that which adjoins with no intervening boundary - I mean Emblematic Freemasonry.²

With these warnings ringing in our ears we shall proceed. And here I have to state that if we adhere to the thorough scholarly historicism of Yates and Waite, we shall not get very much further, for it is in the 'bottomless bog' of Masonic myth, as far as we can apprehend it, that we confront much of the symbolic structure that we are seeking. It is important to remember that we are here dealing with writers and artists who are using these mythologies creatively, and not with scholars who are recording them academically. Wigston writes: 'We must reverse common sense if we would understand this philosophy. ... Let it be here noted, that this is a philosophy of Art. It is *par excellence* the poet's philosophy.'³ All that I can positively show is that Rosicrucian symbolism plays an important part in the work of both Rossetti and his immediate circle. Whether Rossetti was involved with any organisation, or whether he merely absorbed these influences from his reading, we shall never know; all we can say with any certainty is that his eclectic character would no doubt be drawn to such arcane concepts that constitute the Rosicrucian mythos. We should not be put off by this, as Yates rightly proclaims:

I should like to try to persuade sensible people and sensible historians to use the word 'Rosicrucian'. This word has bad associations owing to the uncritical assertions of occultists concerning the existence of a sect or secret society calling themselves Rosicrucians the history and membership of which they claim to

¹ *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.206.

² Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, (London: William Rider, 1924), p.vii.

³ *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, p.200-1.

establish ... The word could, I suggest, be used of a certain style of thinking which is historically recognisable without raising the question of whether a Rosicrucian style of thinker belonged to a secret society.¹

This is precisely the position I intend to adopt, and it is 'this certain style of thinking which is historically recognisable', upon which I intend to concentrate.

Rosicrucianism in the Nineteenth Century.

It is perhaps important to my argument to establish that there existed an 'historically recognisable' form of Rosicrucianism in the period we are discussing. That a form of Rosicrucianism existed within freemasonry, particularly in its continental form, can be established,² but is it in fact the same thing? Browning, for example, was certainly aware of Rosicrucian thought.³ Waite sheds some light on this problem:

We do not meet with any further reference to the Order in England till the year 1836, when Godfrey Higgins published *Anacalypsis*, in the course of which he remarks that he had not sought admission among Rosicrucians or Templars, because it would involve pledges which might be detrimental to his work of research. ... The Templars cited in the passage were the Masonic Order of that denomination, and the legitimate inference is that the Rosicrucians were the Knights Rose-Croix, whom we know to have been at work at the period, both within and without the jurisdiction of a Supreme Council, otherwise of the

¹ Op. cit., p.220.

² Waite examines this in detail in *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*. Goethe, for instance, was involved with Masonic Rosicrucianism; his unfinished work *The Mysteries* (1784) has a Rosicrucian basis. Goethe was deeply involved in both the theory and practice of alchemy, which deeply influenced his work. Rossetti had read and translated parts of *Faust* - this is where he found details of Lilith, for instance - and several of his early drawings are illustrations of this work. In 1782, the Masonic movement in Germany split into two factions, the Rosicrucians and the Illuminati. See Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991-], I (1991), 274, and 397-8.

³ 'I could have written more at length about the Rosicrucians but that time was wanting; as they pretended to derive their knowledge from Solomon - if not Moses or Adam - they had many intermediate transmitters of the doctrine'; Browning to Mrs Thomas FitzGerald, Nov. 1884. In *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs Thomas FitzGerald*, ed. by Edward C McAleer (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1966), pp.186-7, letter 65.

Scottish Rite.¹ Alternatively, Higgins may have referred to the Rose Cross connected with the Royal Order of Scotland. ...the Masonic Knights Templar, whose descent from the old chivalry was accepted implicitly by Higgins. ...it is interesting and curious to note that about 1860, and in Manchester above all places, there flourished a Rosicrucian Brotherhood for a considerable number of years.²

The present Rosicrucian Society of England [Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, or SRIA], on its remodelling some thirty years ago [c. 1865-6], cut off by mutual consent its connection with the few ancient members then existing, who were probably representatives of the 'Rosicrucians' referred to by Higgins, and established itself as a public body, in so far as the fact of its existence was not itself a secret. A previous initiation into Masonry is an indispensable qualification of candidates... The reason for this regulation is that certain masonic secrets are revealed to the accepted, and it would otherwise be unfair to Masonry.³

RA Gilbert, in his biography of Waite, states that the first meeting of the SRIA was held in London on the 1st of June 1867 where 'it was looked upon as a reconstitution rather than an inauguration, for the members maintained that they were reviving a dormant society that had been active during the 1850s'.⁴ The SRIA, writes Waite, is 'totally independent, being established on its own basis, and as a body is no otherwise connected with the Masonic Order than by having its members selected from that Fraternity'.⁵ It is interesting to note in connection with the above, that the Masters and Officers include three Magi and 'seven Ancients who shall form the Representative Council of the

¹ The Scottish Rite is the form of Freemasonry prevalent on the Continent (as opposed to that operating in England), and it is of this form that Gabriele Rossetti would have been a member. It is a widely held belief that the most ancient form of Masonry originated in Scotland (e.g. Wigston, pp.110 and 115). The symbolism of Rosslyn Chapel would tend to support this argument (Wigston, pp.117-19). Modern works, such as Tim Wallace-Murphy, *The Templar Legacy & the Masonic Inheritance within Rosslyn Chapel* (Roslin, Midlothian: 'The Friends of Rosslyn', [n.d.]), perpetuate such ideas.

² *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, pp.562-3.

³ Arthur Edward Waite, *The Real History of the Rosicrucians* (London: George Redway, 1887), p.415. Waite adds: 'It is certain a pseudo-society existed in England before the year 1836.'

⁴ RA Gilbert, *AE Waite: Magician of Many Parts* (Wellingborough, Northants: Crucible / Thorson's, 1987), p.105. Gilbert notes that by 1867 there already existed the Rosicrucian Society in Scotia.

⁵ *Real History of the Rosicrucians*, p.416.

Brotherhood.¹ This reminds us of the structure of the PRB, Burne-Jones's and Morris's Brotherhood, the artists decorating the Oxford Union, and The Firm, all of which had seven members. There were subordinate Colleges of the SRIA in Bristol, Manchester, and Yorkshire, and also one in Edinburgh, which, Waite tells us, pre-dated the London College.

This establishes that forms of Rosicrucianism existed both within and without Freemasonry. Waite was highly critical in his remarks about Masonic Rosicrucians, and Freemasonry in general, and, unlike De Quincey, saw no connection whatever between the original Rosicrucians and the Freemasons.

Apart from Higgin's *Anacalypsis*, two other important works were published within Rossetti's lifetime; Hargrave Jennings's *Curious Things of the Outside World*, 1861 (later reworked and republished in 1887 as *The Rosicrucians; Their Rites and Mysteries*), and Jonathan Yarker's *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity; the Gnosis and Secret Schools of the Middle Ages; Modern Rosicrucianism; and the Various Rites and Degrees of Free and Accepted Masonry*, 1872. Jennings states in his 1861 edition: 'We believe we are also correct in stating that, in our second volume, we shall be the first, and only, modern exponents of Rosicrucianism.'² It was in direct response to these works that Waite hastily wrote his own *Real History of the Rosicrucians*, published in 1887. It is worth noting that during the years 1878-83 - that is, during Rossetti's lifetime - Waite spent his time in the British Museum Library exhaustively studying alchemy, theology, magic, mythology, astronomy, and poetry.³ This forms an interesting parallel to the time spent by Rossetti in the same library during his youth.

The Gothic Revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was largely inspired by the Romantic Movement, also encouraged the revival of the sort of ideas we

¹ Ibid. It is also of interest to note that Blake's circle referred to themselves as 'Ancients'.

² *Curious Things*, I, 15. The bulk of the first volume is concerned with supernatural phenomena of the sort that Rossetti delighted in, and Jennings explains that it is upon this base that 'we propose to raise the structure of the one, supposed, universal religion': I, 259.

³ Gilbert, p.76. 'Waite believed that "in the writings of the men called Mystics and Alchemists there is concealed a doctrine of physical and spiritual evolution, which was the fundamental principle of their philosophy, and was applied by them both in practice": p.92. "The end in view [he wrote] is identical with Hermetists, Theurgists, and with the ancient Greek mysteries alike. It is the conscious and hypostatic union of the intellectual soul with Deity, and its participation in the life of God; but the conception included in this divine name is one infinitely transcendental, and in Hermetic operations, above all, it must be remembered that God is within us': p.94.

are studying. In the works of Barry and Pugin we see the profound influence of the Middle Ages, and we cannot divorce the spirit of that original burst of religious enthusiasm which produced the great cathedrals of Europe from the same spirit which gave birth to the craft-guilds who built them. It was the mediaeval craft-guild of the masons which provided the basis onto which was grafted Speculative Freemasonry in the seventeenth century. The great Victorian church building boom recalled the days of mediaeval religious fervour and Victorian Gothic was the style most favoured to express these beliefs. The High Church movement also encouraged the use of symbol and ritual that had always existed in Catholicism, and was available to be exploited in church ornament and furnishings. Mysticism has always, and can only, express itself through the medium of symbol and ritual, and the renewed interest in both sets the stage for Victorian Rosicrucianism. The Age of Chivalry was transplanted into the Victorian imagination, as if it were itself a Victorian invention. It largely was.¹ Burne-Jones and William Morris, evolving slightly later than the original Preraphaelite Brothers, absorbed this tendency and developed it into something altogether new.

The notion of Christian Chivalry is of immense importance to an understanding of the age and to the art of Rossetti and his circle. One book that had a profound influence on promulgating this ideal was Kenelm Digby's *The Broad Stone of Honour*, first published in 1823, 'which Burne-Jones kept by his bedside for the whole of his life'.² The author describes this work as 'being a collection of those rules and doctrines, which have been received in all ages of chivalry, by the members of our order'.³ This book had an enormous influence on the age, as Fitzgerald notes: 'The *Broadstone* had been one of the hermetic texts of the Young England movement, which Disraeli had tried, or pretended to try, to turn into practical politics.'⁴ Digby tells us that it is composed of :

works which can delight the poet and instruct the sage, which could yield inspiration to the genius of Milton and of Dante, where the student who has

¹ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), examines this whole area in detail.

² Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p.28.

³ Kenelm Digby, *The Broad Stone of Honour: Rules for the Gentlemen of England* (London: C & J Rivington, 1923), p.xxxix.

⁴ Op. cit., p.30.

fathomed the depths of Platonic lore, will behold in action the sublime principles of his divine philosophy.¹

He describes his 'order':

We date the origin of our order from the early institutions which took place in Europe after the Christian Religion had been generally received: and it is therefore in the principles of ancient chivalry, in the character of the knights and barons of the middle ages, that we must look for the virtues and the sentiments which are to be our inheritance.² ... Not to detain you with the observations of those reasoners who took pains to shew the analogy between this order and that of the higher Clergy, in both a superior purity and grandeur of character being regarded as essential, and both being considered as of divine appointment.³

The 'order' to which he alludes is, I suggest, that of the Rosy-Cross. On the title page of the 1823 edition there appears an emblem consisting of three motifs: a roundel of St George slaying the dragon, directly above which is a rose in a smaller roundel, surmounted by an equal-armed cross. These are the insignia of the Rosicrucians. A curious reference to a forebear of Kenelm Digby appears in Waite's *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*:

in *The Freemason* for January 22, 1910, an anonymous contributor furnished a mendacious account of Fludd in connection with a quarterly meeting of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia. At this assembly there was exhibited the photograph of an alleged Rosicrucian Cross and Chain said to have been worn by him as head of the Order in England. The statements concerning it were (1) that the originals were in the possession of a gentleman in Hampshire who was a descendent of Sir Kenelm Digby of the seventeenth century; (2) that this Digby was a Rosicrucian Chief in succession to Fludd; (3) that the articles had been handed down from generation to generation; and (4) that they had been

¹ *Broad Stone* (1923), p.xlvi.

² *Ibid*, p.31.

³ *Ibid*, p.32.

identified by experts as being the work of Southern Germany at the Fludd period.¹

Waite adds, 'we can accept the gentleman of Hampshire who possesses a Digby heirloom which is indubitably a Rose Cross'. It is obvious from this that the belief existed within Masonic circles that the Digby family had Rosicrucian connections, and these of the highest order. The Sir Kenelm Digby mentioned was in fact a flamboyant alchemist and 'natural magician' of the period, whose portrait was painted by van Dyck.² The belief in an 'order' of Christian Chivalry devoted to a higher spiritual ideal propagated by Digby was one that was to permeate through several generations, including that of Rossetti and his circle. Whether this was recognised at the time as being Rosicrucian in nature, is impossible to say.

Another book devoted to a similar ideal of spiritual chivalry and self-sacrifice was Charlotte M Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, published in 1853.³ Both these books are known to have had a profound influence on the thinking of the young Burne-Jones and William Morris. Mackail writes: 'In this book [*The Heir of Redclyffe*], more than in any other, may be traced the religious ideals and social enthusiasms which were stirring in the years between the decline of Tractarianism and the Crimean War'.⁴ Mackail records how these ideals were adopted by Morris's group, 'and more strongly perhaps by Morris than by the rest, from his own greater wealth and more aristocratic temper'.⁵ Morris's first poem was entitled *The Willow and the Red Cliff*.

Two Brotherhoods.

Before turning to the PRB, I wish to quickly examine the Brotherhood of seven centred on Burne-Jones and Morris. I take this out of historical order because it most closely conforms to the ideals we have been looking at.

¹ P.308.

² See CA Burland, *The Arts of the Alchemists* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p.161.

³ It is possible that the Redclyffe of the title is an allusion to a St Mary Redcliffe at Bristol, noted by Queen Elizabeth as 'the fairest, goodliest and most famous parish church in England': Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p.180.

⁴ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, I, 41. Yonge was a close friend of John Keble.

⁵ Ibid.

Burne-Jones and Morris met and formed their life-long friendship while studying for the ministry at Oxford. Both were influenced by the Oxford Movement, and for a while considered converting to Catholicism. After much soul-searching both men decided that, in fact, they were unsuited for a career in the Church. The form of religion that most appealed to them was a form of mediaeval belief that was quite at odds with anything they could find in their own environment. Burne-Jones' imaginative nature was of a particularly mystical disposition, while Morris had always been entranced by the simplicity and sincerity of mediaeval life and thought. It was the age, he believed, to which he spiritually belonged. It is not surprising, then, that both men felt a profound sympathy for the ideals of Christian Chivalry that they found in the *Broad Stone* and the *Heir*. In a letter to Cormell ('Crom') Price in 1853, Burne-Jones shows his awareness of German spiritualism: 'Macdonald and Heeley did us the honour of a visit yesterday. We talked much of all subjects - Transcendentalism and all the host of German systems - we discussed together calmly on dangerous ground'.¹ In the same year, 1st of May, he writes again to Price:

Remember, I have set my heart on our founding a Brotherhood. Learn Sir Galahad [Tennyson] by heart. He is to be the patron of our Order. I have enlisted *one* [Morris] in the project up here, heart and soul. You shall have a copy of the canons one day.

(Signed) General of the Order of Sir Galahad.²

A few months later he wrote, 'we must enlist you, dear brother, in this crusade and Holy Warfare against the age, "the heartless coldness of the times"'.³ This adoption of Sir Galahad as patron of their Order may perhaps have been influenced by the hero of *The Heir of Redclyffe*, who declares that his favourite fictional character (and obvious model) is Sir Galahad. I think it is no coincidence that Sir Galahad is the Red-Cross knight in the Grail Romances.⁴ This ideal of Mystical Christian Chivalry was to

¹ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, I, 84. Other interests at this time were Poe, mesmerism, and 'table-turning'.

² *Ibid.*, p.77.

³ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁴ See *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Chapter 2, 'The Shield', relates the story of how Sir Galahad won the shield of the Red-Cross and became its rightful owner by inheritance.

influence Burne-Jones throughout his life, informing image after image in his work, and it is my belief that behind it stands, at least in part, a Rosicrucian influence. This is a feature that thoroughly permeates the Aesthetic Tradition until its demise.

I turn now to the original Preraphaelite Brotherhood. This Brotherhood is of an entirely different nature from that of Burne-Jones and Morris. If there was a Rosicrucian influence at work here, it took a different bias from that we have been examining. However, it is my belief that the PRB was formed around a structure perhaps based upon a Masonic model. It was from Rossetti's suggestion that the term 'Brotherhood' be added to 'Preraphaelite',¹ and this may have derived from his father's obsession with secret societies. Hunt, who was at this time committed to atheism, made the initial objection that this smacked too much of clericalism, but this was overruled. The term 'Brotherhood' should not at this time be understood to reflect a collective association with Christian beliefs at this time. Their collective beliefs, if in fact they were formulated clearly enough to be identified, are best illustrated by the manifesto composed by Hunt and Rossetti soon after the Brotherhood was formed. It must be said, however, that in view of the differences between the members, this manifesto does seem somewhat eclectic. Its diversity may be explained if we consider it in the light of Masonic tolerance:

'Masonry propagates no creed...except its own most simple and sublime one taught by Nature and Reason. There has never been a false religion in the world. The permanent and universal revelation is written in visible Nature and explained by the reason and is completed by the analogies of faith. There is but one true religion, one dogma, one legitimate belief.' Masonry is defined in the words 'a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols,' and it is stated as tolerably clear that the essential principle and bond of union of all masons is 'the universal religion of humanity.' The constitutions from 1717 onwards have laid stress on freedom of conscience; belief in any particular system of dogmas is not necessarily excluded but is regarded as matter of secondary importance or even prejudicial to the law of universal love and toleration. One recalls the

¹ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), I, 141.

celebrated dictum, 'Every wise man has the same religion and no wise man will say what it is.'¹

This ideal of expressing personal belief through a system of symbols seems to be a particular hallmark of the three principal members of the PRB. The emphasis on Nature as the touchstone of experience and belief was one that was close to the heart of both Hunt and Ruskin, and as we have seen, is an idea with a very long pedigree indeed. The scientific observation and depiction of Nature was at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal, and this corresponds to the Rosicrucian belief that God's truth had been written by his hand in Nature. An echo of this belief may be found in Ruskin's dictum 'go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing'.²

Another manifestation of Masonry that strikes a relevant chord is the fundamental belief in the identity and freedom of nations:

it seems certain that 'the ancient and accepted Scottish Rite' has always stood for the natural rights of man against religious and political despotisms.

'Wherever a nation struggles to gain or regain its freedom, wherever the human mind asserts its independence and the people demand their inalienable rights, there shall go our warmest sympathies.'³

Such ideas hold a particular relevance for Gabriele as a political exile. The PRB were attempting to challenge the artistic despotism of the Royal Academy. William Sharp writes: 'nothing can be more misleading than to call Rossetti a Pre-Raphaelite in any other sense of the term than that of a Protester'.⁴ Grieve similarly notes: 'The Pre-Raphaelites were reformers and from the start they introduced contemporary social problems into their art.'⁵ This is not only reflected in the list of Immortals in the

¹ RD Waller, *The Rossetti Family 1824-1854* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932), pp.81-2.

² John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, Preface, p.v.

³ Waller, p.82.

⁴ DGR, p.170.

⁵ Alastair Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: 1. 'Found': 2. The Pre-Raphaelite Modern Life Subject*, (Norwich: Real World Publications, 1976), p.21.

Preraphaelite manifesto, but also in several of their paintings, for instance Hunt's *Rienzi*, and Millais' *Huguenot* and *The Order of Release*. The list of Immortals can be broken down into four very distinct divisions: 1) Christ - who is above all; 2) writers and poets; 3) painters; and 4) nationalists, partisans, and freedom fighters.¹ Only two figures remain who do not conform to this system of division, Bacon and Newton. These figures are interesting; both straddle the dividing line between alchemy and science. Bacon is claimed to be both a Rationalist and a Rosicrucian by differing factions.

The figures that make up this list were awarded one to three stars to denote their importance, with the exception of Christ, who alone merits four stars. Hunt wrote: 'We agreed that there were different degrees of glory in great men, and that these grades should be denoted by one, two, or three stars.'² The words 'degrees' and 'grades' are distinctly reminiscent of Freemasonry. Considered in these terms, Christ equates with the Grand Master, which is precisely how De Quincey describes Him. He writes that in Masonic terms; 'This temple [of the Holy Spirit which it was their business to erect in the spirit of man] was the abstract of the doctrine of Christ, who was the grand Master'.³ Hunt wrote of the figures on the list:

the few far-seeing ones revealed to us vast visions of beauty. Where these dreams were too profound for our sight to fathom, our new iconoclasm dictated that such were too little substantial for human trust; for of spiritual powers we for the moment felt we knew nothing, and we saw no profit in relying upon a vision, however beautiful it might be.

Arguing thus, Gabriel wrote out the following manifesto of our absence of faith in immortality, save in that perennial influence exercised by great thinkers and workers...⁴

¹ I include Columbus in this last group, and although not a patriot in the strict sense, he represents a sort of Moses figure leading his children to the New World, a typical Rosicrucian dream of a new Utopian society. Bacon's *New Atlantis* fully complies with this dream.

² Hunt, I, 158.

³ Op. cit., p.424.

⁴ Hunt, I, 158-9. 'Once, in a studio enclave, some of us drew up a declaration that there was no immortality for humanity except that which was gained by man's own genius or heroism. We were still under the influence of Voltaire, Gibbon, Byron, and Shelley, and we could leave no corners or spaces in our minds unsearched and unswept. Our determination to respect no authority that stood in the way of fresh research in art seemed to compel us to try what the result would be in matters metaphysical, denying all that could not be tangibly proved.'

Another characteristic of the Brotherhood that mimicked Freemasonry was its insistence upon secrecy. The very title of the PRB had about it a deliberate air of mystery. Hunt makes frequent references to 'our mystic monogram PRB'.¹ One is reminded of rule five in the Rosicrucian manifesto *Fama*, 'The word CR should be their seal, mark, and character'. He adds, 'When we agreed to use the letters PRB as our insignia, we made each member solemnly promise to keep its meaning strictly secret'.² One wonders why this insignia was imbued with such importance. Hunt tells of the reaction when the meaning of the monogram was disclosed:

We knew that some one of our body had played traitor, and at the next meeting, when we insisted upon a searching investigation being made, Gabriel avowed that little Munro had persisted for long in beseeching him to tell the riddle, till, under the pledge of secrecy, the mysterious monogram had been explained.³

Some degree of the importance placed on the PRB monogram may be judged from Rossetti's words to Stephens, describing the revelation as 'a horrible and crushing thought'. He continues: 'The first time we all come together some desperate means must be arrived at whereby to re-establish our mystery - even though it be done by the adoption of a new monogram.'⁴ It is strange that it was Rossetti who divulged the meaning, for he, more than any other member of the group, was the enthusiast for secret organisations. Here we have a 'Brotherhood', composed of seven members, which has its own 'mystic monogram', which insists on secrecy and communal involvement, and which is devoted to the overthrow of an existing and (to their view) despotic organisation. These points have always been dismissed as being youthful fancies or simple game-playing. I do not believe this to be the case. It is my view that the PRB was modelled on distinctly Masonic or Rosicrucian lines.

¹ Ibid, p.111. This is suggestive of occult practice where the adept would identify himself by the use of initials standing for a Latin phrase or motto. This long-established characteristic was adopted by the Golden Dawn, of which WB Yeats was a member. My own view is that the letters PRB may well have stood for something other than the accepted interpretation.

² Ibid, p.141.

³ Ibid, p.200.

⁴ Grylls, *Portrait of Rossetti*, p.34.

The symbols of the Rose-Cross.

The Rose-Cross.

The original form of the Rose-Cross, as it is mentioned in the original Rosicrucian manifestos, seems to be simply the Red Cross of St George. As such, it is often depicted carried by Christ Triumphant (for instance, by Durer and Holbein), and stands as the emblem of Christ militant in his battles against Satan, death, and the powers of darkness.¹ In the words of the English Rosicrucian Robert Fludd, it is 'the Cross sprinkled with the rosy blood of Christ'.² Waite writes;

The name of Rosy Cross refers to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the Tree and to the pouring forth of His blood thereon. This sacrifice was typified in all Ancient Mysteries, and as those who belong to the Order look upon Jesus as the long-expected Messiah - though not apparently as God manifested in flesh - He may be called their Founder, and He it is who is the Master of the Rosy Cross.³

It will be seen from this that the term 'rosy' refers to the colour of Christ's blood, and not to the flower. Until 1615 we do not find any conjunction of the separate symbols of the rose and the cross, except in the personal seal of Martin Luther, with which there is no apparent connection. The Rose Cross, - otherwise the Cross of St George, - was inherited by the original Brotherhood from a preceding organisation, Simon Studion's Militia Crucifera Evangelica as a symbol of the Church Militant.⁴ Waite describes Studion's Militia as

¹ The alchemists used this image as a metaphor for a stage of the Work. Durer's image of Christ Triumphant (bearing the flag of the cross) in the series of *The Small Passion*, is identical to that of the alchemical Resurrection in the *Rosary of the Philosophers*. See *Woodcuts of Durer*, plate 73, and F Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry* (London: William Heinemann, 1951), p.154, Fig.24.

² De Quincey, op. cit., p.422.

³ *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, pp.571-2. The wording of this is significant, because it emphatically identifies Christ as the sacrificial King of the Fertility Mysteries.

⁴ Waite states, in *Brotherhood*, that the conjunction of the rose and cross does appear in Studion's *Naometria* (1604); 'I have searched vainly everywhere...for an example of the Rosy Cross prior to the publication of the Fama - Luther and his seal excepted - and ... I have found it at last in "Naometria"': P.641. Waite is adamant that the term Rosicrucian only applies under the conjunction of the symbols of flower and cross. My view is that while this applies in later periods, there is no evidence contained in the first two manifestos of the Fraternity to support this.

An occult evangelical fraternity - a kind of spiritual chivalry - in respect of official religious belief, interpretation of astronomical signs and use of symbols, it is substantially identical with the record of the later Order, though somewhat distinguished therefrom by its Second Advent concern.¹

It was a symbol of militant Christianity derived from the Crusaders and subsequently used as a symbol of militant Protestantism. In the hands of the Rosicrucians, it becomes the ultimate symbol of the Reformation.

In the third of the original Rosicrucian manifestos, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, published in Strasbourg in 1616, we are introduced to another version of the Rose-Cross. In his preparations for the Wedding, to which he has been summoned by an angel, the fabled father of the Rosicrucians writes: 'I prepared myself for the way, put on my white linnen coat, girded my loyns, with a blood-red ribbon bound cross-ways over my shoulder. In my hat I stuck four red roses, that I might the sooner by this token be taken notice of amongst the throng.'²

The statement 'with a blood-red ribbon bound cross-ways over my shoulder' has led to some confusion about what is meant by this. Waite, for instance states, 'There is nothing in the text to shew that CRC fixed anything but an ordinary Calvary Cross to his shoulder'.³ Although this corresponds with the armorial traditions of the Crusader Knights Templar, and would thus tend to identify CRC with this militant Order, the generally accepted form is understood to consist of a red saltire worn across the front of the body. This form of the Rose-Cross is an immediate and unambiguous means of identifying a Rosicrucian context.

The red saltire and the four roses described in the *Chemical Wedding* derive from the personal coat of arms of the author of the third manifesto, Johann Valentin Andreae. This consists of a red St Andrew's cross (for Andreae) on a white ground, in each quarter of which is a red rose. Curiously, these arms are identical to those of the Duke of Lennox, whose motto is 'En la rose je fleurie', 'In the rose I flourish'. Above the

¹ Ibid, p.50.

² The interested reader will find the whole of this lengthy manifesto reproduced, along with its ciphers, in Waite's *Real History of the Rosicrucians*, pp.99-196 (p.107). Unfortunately, as Waite informs us, the final fragment is missing in the original, and the conclusion remains a mystery. The texts of the other two manifestos are also to be found in this work.

³ *Brotherhood*, pp.191-2.

helm of Andreae's arms is a crest consisting of what appears to be a vertically divided heart, on each side of which is shown a diagonal cross and four roses as they appear on the shield.¹ This crest emblem is identical to Rossetti's 'simple' Rosicrucian motif.

There is a certain irony about this form of the Rose-Cross. We do not know who wrote the first two Rosicrucian Manifestos, but the third was indisputably the work of Andreae.² The *Chemical Wedding* is entirely different from the *Fama* and the *Confessio*, both in style and content, and consists of a fable which is colourful, imaginative, entertaining, and dare I say, humorous. This is in direct contrast to the somewhat fanatical content of the *Confessio*. While De Quincey believed that Andreae composed all three manifestos, Waite proposes that Andreae wrote only the third, and this in the form of a satire ridiculing the true Rosicrucians.³ By the year of the Wedding, 1457, Father Christian Rosencreutz would have attained the venerable age of 81 years, hardly cutting the dashing figure of a vigorous Knight of Christ engaged on a militant crusade to rid the world of Papism and all other evils. In fact the gentle and humble Father finds himself plunged into all manner of scrapes through his own ineptitude and lack of bravado. A good example of how this satire works is the way in which the Rose-Cross is itself ridiculed: rather than being the emblem of Militant Christian Chivalry - that is the Crusading Red-Cross of St George, the true symbol of the Rosicrucians, - Andreae knocks it on its side and adorns it with four red roses, and in doing so substitutes a sign of peace and love for that of blood. The character of the Father emphasises his humility and simplicity rather than his militancy. Even the manner in which Christian Rosencreutz wears the Rose-Cross has about it an air of the ridiculous, in that his garb is made to resemble classical female attire - a 'white linen coat [i.e., a dress] ... with a blood-red ribbon bound cross-ways over my shoulder' (i.e., the diagonal ribbons which cross the chest between the breasts).⁴ In short, he

¹ Reproduced in Waite's *Real History*, p.217.

² See *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, pp.185-7.

³ Waite writes in *Brotherhood*, p.213; 'there is no sect at the period so likely to have produced the Rosicrucian claim as *Militia Crucifera Evangelica*, and no person so likely to have written the Rosicrucian manifestos as Simon Studion or his immediate successor, if any, in the "strong sect", and, p.214, 'I conclude that Andreae, as one standing without, knew all the occult claim *ab origine symboli*, and that he loathed it, - also *ab origine*.'

⁴ Rossetti pictures Jane in this garb in *La Pia de' Tolomei*, 1868-80 (Fig.11). Surtees Cat. no. 207, plate 300. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence. The black crows, in alchemical symbolism, represent death and putrefaction, one the themes of the painting. Alchemically, this occurs after the 'marriage': this painting is Rossetti's symbolic comment on Jane's conjugal state.

emasculates the symbol. Moreover, to add further insult, Andreae uses his own arms for the purpose.

Andreae's satire failed. What is worse, it backfired - it was taken entirely seriously. All that happened was that a new symbol was provided which would in the future become the hallmark and motif of the Fraternity he had sought to discredit. Where he had used his own arms to parody and mock the Fraternity, he now had them forever adopted as the 'genuine' symbol of the movement. Andreae went down in history as one of the founders of the very organisation he despised and loathed and sought to ridicule. With four red roses stuck in his hat, the aged Father strides manfully forth to the mystical Wedding, resembling more a clown than a Knight of Christ.

Despite this, the Red Saltire and Roses became the accepted 'signature' of the Rosicrucians. The pattern produced by repeating this motif is to be found in two of Rossetti's pictures, *Mary Magdalene at the House of Simon the Pharisee*, and *St George and the Princess Sabra*.¹ In other of Rossetti's paintings, there occurs what I call his 'simple' Rosicrucian motif: - OXOXO. This is a stylised form of the saltire and roses, and occurs often in bandings and strips in his mediaeval period of paintings. In the Llandaff Triptych, another form of the Rose-Cross is used by Rossetti; here it takes the form of the St George's Cross quartered with four red roses, worn on the shoulders of the angels in the foreground.

In the last chapter I demonstrated that the symbol of the cross was intimately connected with the notion of the turning year, and was formed by the intersection of the solstices and equinoxes. This provides us with a simple vertical equal-armed cross of the St George type. The Celtic form of this cross employs the arms as the radii, or spokes, of the solar wheel as it rolls across the sky and around the circumference of the seasons. As a symbol of the wheel of the heavens - the endless mystery of the observable universe - it represents the balance of all the dualities of which the universe is composed; spirit and matter, time and space, heaven and earth, light and dark, heat and cold, male and female, life and death, etc. Another important aspect of the cross is that it is a symbol of the Tree of Life and Death, and of the cyclical nature of the universe. In Rosicrucian terms, it represents the cross of the material universe upon which the light of the soul is crucified when it enters the physical body. In Christian mythology it

¹ These paintings are discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

is the Tree of Eden, upon which Christ was ultimately crucified. But this is a version of a far older myth. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the Tree of Life is the Goddess herself. The Tree is an Apple-tree, and from it the Sun-god is born. It is also the Tree upon which he is sacrificed. The Rose-Cross is, above all, a solar cross. If the diagonal cross of the Rosicrucians is added to the Red-Cross of St George and also to the sun-wheel of the Celtic Cross, we arrive at the composite symbol of the eight-spoked wheel of the solar year. In this context, the red saltire may be seen to represent the four Celtic fire festivals.

It is for this reason that Rosicrucianism held a particular appeal for the Celtic Revivalists. In this symbol, with its accent on the mysteries of solar worship, sacred fire, and the rituals of fertility and the turning year, they recognised a form of religion coincident with those of their own Celtic pagan past to which they now turned for inspiration. In the ancient Culdee Church, independent and isolated from Rome, a form of religion was practised that was an amalgam of Druidical worship and Christianity. This form of Christianity was always believed to have been a purer form than that practised by Rome, as it had arrived in Ireland by a different route. Christ was seen as the direct counterpart of the Celtic Sun-god Lugh, and St Bridget, 'the Celtic Mary', was the step-mother of Christ in Celtic folklore.¹ John Duncan makes full use of this tradition in his paintings. Thus there could hardly have been a form of mystical and esoteric knowledge so well suited to their own quest for cultural identity. It was as if the Sun-god Lugh had been reborn in the East.

There is a direct link between Rossetti and the Celtic Revival in the person of William Sharp, Rossetti's companion and biographer, who later wrote on Celtic subjects under the name Fiona Macleod. Phoebe Anna Traquair honoured Rossetti and other persons connected with this style of ideology; Blake, Carlyle, Ruskin, William Bell

¹ St Bridget was the Christianised version of the Celtic Goddess Brighid, who was the counterpart of Artemis. Brighid was the patroness of poetry, inspiration, and divination. She was also the goddess of fire. Her Christian role as the foster-mother of Christ reflects her pagan function as the midwife at the birth of the Celtic Son of Light. Artemis, likewise, is the goddess of childbirth. F Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1989), p.27, notes; 'The British *Brigantia* or the Gaelic *Bridget* (*Bride*) has affinities with Pallas Athene or Minerva, the moon goddess; with Hera or Juno, goddess of the hearth and home; and with Persephone or Proserpine in her character of goddess of spring or the Corn-Maiden.' In her Foreword, p.vii, McNeill explains the significance of the title of her work, 'The Silver Bough of the sacred Apple-tree, laden with crystal blossoms or golden fruit, is the equivalent in Celtic mythology of the Golden Bough of classical mythology - the symbolic bond between the world we know and the Otherworld'. This work was originally published in four volumes of which this edition is the first, *Scottish Folk-Lore and Folk-Belief*.

Scott, Burne-Jones, Watts, Tennyson, Browning, among others, in her mural decorations for the Royal Hospital for Sick Children Mortuary Chapel, Edinburgh. Rossetti is again featured in Traquair's mural on the south wall of the Song School of St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh.¹ In Traquair's work may be traced many of the symbolic devices under consideration.

The Red-Cross Knight: St George, Sir Galahad, and King Arthur.

The figure of St George is not only the patron saint of England, but also an important Rosicrucian archetype. As such, he embodies and personifies the ideal of the Red-Cross Knight of Christian chivalry.

St George, who was both a Christian and a soldier was martyred in the Middle East circa 300 AD. Because of his martyrdom, he represents a type of Christ. He was adopted as the patron of the Crusaders after he had appeared to them in a vision during the siege of Antioch in 1098, and was commemorated in the rhyme,

A bloodie cross he bore,
The deare remembraunce of his dying Lord.²

During the Crusades, the Knights Templar came to be associated with St George, at least in the minds of the Saracens.³ King Richard Coeur de Lion adopted the war-cry 'St George for England' after he had followed instructions given to him in a vision, and

¹ For details of these murals, see Elizabeth Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 1993), pp.13-21. Traquair produced several designs from Rossetti, the most notable being a beautiful illuminated manuscript of *The House of Life*. She also produced an illuminated manuscript of the *Vita Nuova*: see pp.29-31.

² Francis Bond, *Dedications and Patron Saints of English Churches: Ecclesiastical Symbolism, Saints and their Emblems* (London: Humphrey Milford / Oxford University Press, 1914), pp.151-2.

³ See Thomas Keightley, *Secret Societies of the Middle Ages* (London: C Cox, 1848), p.200. Keightley, who was an intimate friend of the Rossetti's, interestingly refutes the notion of chivalry commonly attached to the Crusades: 'The opinion of the Crusades having been the emanation of the spirit of chivalry is one of the most erroneous that can be conceived, yet it is one of the most widely spread. Romances, and those who write history as if it were a romance exert all their power to keep up the illusion, and the very sound of the word Crusade conjures up in most minds the ideas of waving plumes, gaudy sur-coats, emblazoned shields, with lady's love, knightly honour, and courteous feats of arms. We venture to assert that the Crusades did *not* originate in chivalry, and that the first Crusade, the most important of them ... does not present a single vestige of what is usually understood by the term chivalry'. pp.164-5.

subsequently won his battle. He was adopted as the patron saint of England by Edward the Third, when he created the Order of the Garter. His story is told in four ballads in *Percy's Reliques*, and in one of them, *St George for England*, he is humorously compared with that other national hero, King Arthur.

The mythology of the Masons makes the claim that they are the direct descendants of the Knights Templar, as Wigston notes:

The Templars were the successors of the Knights of the Round Table, and the Rosicrucians appear to have been again affiliated with the Templars. The names change, the rites alter, the philosophy may be different, but the principles remain affiliating all these societies to Masonry.¹

Wigston also makes the truly astonishing claim: 'Masons were united with the Rose Croix in England under King Arthur.'² To the Rosicrucian mind (and no-doubt the Masonic also), St George represents the idea of the chivalric paradigm 'par excellence'. In the above quotations, four groups are linked together; the Knights of the Round Table, the Knights Templar, and the Rosicrucians, and the Masons. Reason - and good scholarship - would declare that such a statement is absurd, but it is essential to remember that what we are dealing with is a mythology in its own right. Reason has no place here, - 'We must reverse common sense if we would understand this philosophy' - and we must, as it were, surrender ourselves to the symbol. And the central symbol of this mythos is the Sun-god.

¹ WFC Wigston, *Bacon, Shakespeare, and the Rosicrucians*, p.110.

² *Ibid*, p.138. Just such a combination of images may be seen in King Arthur's Round Table hanging in the Guild Hall, Winchester. It was made by Edward III in 1344, who pledged in St. George's Chapel, Windsor, that he would recreate the Round Table for his own knights. King Arthur is depicted surmounting a rose, and the table itself is an obvious reference to the solar year. While Frances Yates (*Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.129, fn.1) dismisses Wigston as 'a crank whose book is otherwise utter nonsense', it does reflect the beliefs commonly held within Masonic circles. It cannot be stressed too much that these ideas form a pseudo-mythology in their own right, and that we must follow them as they lead in order to comprehend both their logic and their influence. Wigston was familiar with the works of Gabriele Rossetti, from whom he quotes, stating of his *Anti-papal Spirit which Produced the Reformation*, that 'No better work exists on the subject': p.86. Gabriele Rossetti and Wigston share a similar approach in their respective enquiries. Eric Reginald Pearce Vincent, *Gabriele Rossetti in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p.72, notes of such studies that 'they attracted, and continue to attract, a certain type of mind for whom the appeal of esoteric mysticism is stronger than that of reason'. He further notes, p.92, that 'nothing is too absurd to be accepted by Rossetti in proof of his arguments'.

The figures of St George and King Arthur represent the same motif but from different cultural backgrounds. St George, who in this context is the same figure as St Michael, represents the Sun-god. In that he underwent the sacrificial death of martyrdom, he is a type of Christ. Both Christ and St George are mythological portrayals of the dying Sun-god who is ritualistically slain for the continuance of life. This is why Christ is sometimes depicted as carrying a white banner on which is the Red-Cross of St George. Arthur, likewise, has the attributes of a Celtic Sun-god, who, although he is slain, never dies, but is taken over the seas to the 'apple isle' of the Triple-goddess.¹ Arthur is also the soul of the land of Britain; he sleeps within the hollow hills awaiting his return in time of need. From whatever stock the inhabitants of Britain derive, Arthur is the cultural symbol and rallying point of Britain and the British.² These two figures combine to form a national identity; the Red-Cross Knight of England, St George, and the Celtic British 'once and future king', King Arthur. When Blake began that peculiarly British anthem *Jerusalem*, with the words 'And did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon England's mountains green', he was referring not only to the myth that Jesus had once visited these shores with his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, but no doubt also had in mind this conflation of ideas that expresses the relationship between the Sun-god and the island itself, linking Christ with this mythic tradition.³ Arthur, in a sense, (and this is how Rossetti paints him), is the British Christ.⁴ Thus St George and King Arthur are both British Christ-figures, from whom this island nation draws its strength and identity.⁵

¹ H Flanders Dunbar, *Symbolism in Mediaeval Thought and its Consummation in the Divine Comedy* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p.431, fn.93, notes: 'Arthur, the Grail hero, and various other characters have solar significance.' She also notes that Arthur's twelve victories correspond with the twelve labours of Hercules (another solar-hero), and that his status as 'once and future king' indicate his mythic origins.

² Dunbar, p.431, notes how the Plantagenets employed the Arthurian legends in an attempt to unify the Celtic-Anglo-Saxon-Norman populations of the kingdom, in the same way that Dante also dreamt of a similar political unification of Italy. In 'The Sun of the Quest', pp.430-437, Dunbar notes the similarities between Dante's quest and that of the Grail: Rossetti's idealism is related to both.

³ It is important to note Blake's image of Christ's feet walking upon the *mountains* of England: it symbolises the progress of a solar-god over the peaks, and I shall show this to be an important motif in Aesthetic art.

⁴ This is particularly the case in *The Seed of David*, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 8.

⁵ Rudolf Steiner, the celebrated educationalist, occultist and Rosicrucian, recognised the sun-symbolism in the Arthurian myths, as Lampo writes: 'The Archangel Michael, he says, is a "sun spirit", whose task is to bring about "a more esoteric understanding of the truths of Christianity"'. For, according to Steiner, Christ also came from the sun, which is also the source of intelligence. Arthur's task was to become the vessel of the sun-forces working in nature at Tintagel, and to cause these forces to spread all over Europe, much of it still dominated by the "wild demonic powers of old". A group of

Many paintings in the Aesthetic Tradition draw on this motif: an excellent example is Arthur Hughes' painting, *The Knight of the Sun*,¹ which depicts Arthur as the dying solar-hero. The colour symbolism of red and gold is that of the Sun-god, and is the same as that which Rossetti uses for his paintings of St George as solar-hero.

Arthur is also of considerable importance because by the time he becomes the focus of the mediaeval romances, he had become a thorough representative of Christ. In the early battles of his kingship, those by which he reclaims the land, he rides into the thick of the fray bearing the insignia of the Holy Cross.² Like Constantine the Great, he conquers 'in this sign'. Nennius, in the *Historia Brittonum*, wrote that Arthur wore 'the effigy of the Holy Mary Eternal Virgin on his shoulders' at the battle of Guinnion.³ Arthur is important in that, while he becomes a warrior of Christ, he never loses the aura of Celtic mystery that surrounds him - he is at once pagan and Christian. He is also the model of the nationalist freedom-fighter.

All these ideas found a fertile home in the Victorian imagination, whether it recognised the Rosicrucian symbolism attached to these myths or not. They were ideas particularly suited to the notion of Empire, in which the ideal of the high-minded, mystical Christian warrior represented a perfect model for the nation's manhood. It is in precisely this way that Kenelm Digby, in *The Broad Stone of Honour*, presents his prototype of Christian chivalry. The same is true of Charlotte M Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, in which Sir Galahad is the role model. In the circle of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris, this ideal found a particularly fertile home. Rossetti's mediaevalism is centred around three figures; Dante, Arthur, and St George. At this time also, Tennyson

twelve men surrounded Arthur, as the constellations of the zodiac are grouped around the sun. This grouping, says Steiner, is the symbolic 'Round Table', a circle of the twelve knights, with Arthur at the centre. Their mission was to set out on expeditions throughout Europe, to carry the forces of civilisation - the sun-force - to all the dark places': Hubert Lampo and Pieter Paul Koster, *Arthur and the Grail* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1988), p.6. We may note here the similarity between Arthur and his knights and Christ and his disciples.

¹ Private collection.

² 'We read in the *Annales Cambriae*: "518: The battle of Badon, in which Arthur wore the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three full days, and in which the Britons were victorious.'" Lampo and Koster, p.24.

³ Ibid, pp.26-7. 'We also read that "on those days the heathens were routed and suffered terrible losses, thanks to the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Holy Mary, His Virgin Mother".' This reminds us of the lines in Sonnet 48, *Death in Love*;

There came an image in Life's retinue
That had Love's wings and bore his gonfalon:
Fair was the web, and nobly wrought thereon,
O soul-sequestered face, thy form and hue!

was inspiring the nation with his *Idylls of the King*. Ruskin was later to centre his ideals of a political social reform on the figure of St George in his philanthropic Guild of St George. In short, the mythic heroes of St George and King Arthur seem to inspire the ideals and aspirations of that Victorian patriotism and imperialism, which was conquering large swathes of the undeveloped world 'in this sign'.

Even in our own times one comes across advertisements offering gold sovereigns which are modern mintings of the famous nineteenth century design by Benedetto Pistrucci of St George slaying the dragon. Benedetto was the brother of Filippo Pistrucci, a close friend of the Rossetti family who executed several paintings of the Rossetti children: two of Maria, two of Gabriel, two of Christina, and one of William. He was well acquainted with the writings and theories of old Gabriele, as a letter of 1846 shows:

I have finished the second volume of the *Amor Platonico* - a curse on the head of the first inventors of these maddening things. Miserable Dante if he too (as appears from your work) raved like them. I should not wish to be him even if I could attain double his splendour and glory.¹

Behind this familiar icon of St George there is an interesting form of symbolism. I have already shown that St George is as a type of Christ, and, like St Michael, he is a solar warrior, a knight of light. He is usually shown riding a white horse, also a solar symbol, and in perpetual combat with the forces of darkness, paganism, evil, and death, symbolised by the dragon. The dragon, in this context, is not a dragon, but actually a snake, or 'worm'. This snake represents one of the pair usually shown around the caduceus of Hermes. This pair symbolise the conflicting though balancing universal forces of wisdom, fertility, and the rejuvenating life principle pitted in a perpetual struggle with those of death, darkness, and chaos. These are held in balance by the central shaft of the magical wand of Hermes.

The same symbolism is to be found in the image of St George and the dragon. His lance performs the same function as the wand of Hermes, which separates and holds in balance the opposing forces of the knight of light and the dragon of darkness. Thus the

¹ Vincent, *Gabriele Rossetti in England*, p.46.

universe is held in a state of constant equilibrium. This is the same symbol as that of St Michael, the archangel of solar light pitted in perpetual combat with Satan, the fallen angel of darkness.¹ Whatever his particular identity, be it St George, Jesus, King Arthur, or Adonis, the solar hero is the saviour of all those committed to the quest to find him, understand his nature, and to enter his kingdom. This is the Platonic, Hermetic, and alchemical quest of the soul.

Besides these mythological and symbolical associations, St George also has a direct historical link with the original Rosicrucian Fraternity. The key figures around which the Rosicrucian movement revolved, were the Elector Palatine of the Rhine, Frederick V, and his new wife, the Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King James I of England and VI of Scotland. This couple took the dying glories of the English Elizabethan Renaissance to a new home in Europe, at the same time, it was hoped, cementing a Protestant alliance against the forces of the Counter Reformation ranged against them. On the 7th February, a week before the wedding, Frederick was invested with the Order of the Garter. The Most Noble Order of the Garter is limited to twenty five knights, the sovereign, and members of the royal family. It is the highest institution of knighthood in the realm of Great Britain. Yates explains the significance of this honour:

The very special significance attached to the Order of the Garter was again an Elizabethan tradition. There had been a great revival of the Order, its ceremonies, processions, and ethos, during the reign of Elizabeth, who had used it as a means of drawing the noblemen together in common service to the Crown. When the Palsgrave [the English term for the Elector Palatine] became a Garter Knight he enlisted under the banner of the Red Cross of St George in defence of the causes for which the Order stood, the fighting of the Dragon of Wrong and the defence of the Monarch.²

¹ Ruskin wrote in *Pre-Raphaelitism*, p.11: 'Our full energies are to be given to the soul's work - to the great fight with the Dragon - the taking the kingdom of heaven by force.'

² *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.3. There is a portrait miniature of Frederick wearing the lesser George and Garter ribbon, painted by Nicholas Hilliard, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. There is also another of the Princess Elizabeth. Both were painted in 1612 or 13, before they left the country.

The great collar of the Order of the Garter consists of alternating knots and bucklets, and in the centre of each of the latter, is a rose. Here we find combined three symbols which figure strongly in Rosicrucian imagery; the Red-Cross of St George, St George himself slaying the dragon, and the Rose. It also denotes the very highest degree of chivalric honour possible. Shortly after the royal wedding, a lavish and allegorical firework display was mounted in honour of the couple, which featured St George as its theme: 'it was clearly intended as an allegory of the Elector Palatine as St George, patron of the Order of the Garter, clearing the world of evil enchantment'.¹ The 'evil enchantment' was, we may understand, Catholicism. Frederick was seen as the head of the anti-Hapsburg and anti-Catholic alliance, in that he now had family connections with the major Protestant countries of Europe.

On 26th August 1619, the Bohemians offered the crown of their country - formerly firmly under Hapsburg control - to Frederick, the Elector Palatine. The coronation of Frederick and Elizabeth as King and Queen of Bohemia took on an almost mystical significance, and contemporary prints show them beneath the sunburst of the sacred name of God.² These two figures can be described as the Rosicrucian King and Queen, and they became the focus of an allegorical mythos of their own. Elizabeth, a strikingly beautiful woman, was known as the Queen of Hearts, a title reputedly earned by her sweet disposition and good nature displayed in the face of adversity.³ It was to this court in Prague, that had earlier been a centre of Hermetic studies, Renaissance culture and learning, visited by Giordano Bruno, Sir Philip Sydney, John Dee, Johannes Kepler, and attended by the renowned alchemist and Rosicrucian apologist Michael Maier, that Frederick and Elizabeth added their own form of glamour.⁴ Their picturesque Castle at

¹ Ibid., p.1.

² Reproduced in *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.

³ There is a fine portrait of her by Gerard Honthorst in the National Portrait Gallery, painted shortly after she was widowed, in which she is symbolically holding two roses in her right hand, besides which is written 'Queen of Bohemia'. Elizabeth is portrayed as the Rosicrucian Queen. She was idolised by John Donne, whose 'cult of Elizabeth Stuart was on a note of religious ecstasy', writes Yates, and his friend, Sir Henry Wotton, wrote a famous poem, 'on his mistress the Queen of Bohemia', 'comparing her to the rose, queen of flowers': *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, pp.138-9, and plate 29. Rossetti used the title Queen of Hearts, *Regina Cordium*, for at least two paintings.

⁴ Yates writes; 'Donne's Marriage Song, written for the wedding of "the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine", uses imagery about the joining of two phoenixes, about a marriage of sun and moon, which is already in the alchemical vein which was to be so characteristic of their cult in Rosicrucian circles abroad.' Op. cit., p.231.

Heidelberg, now no longer in existence, could well be the model for the castle in which the *Chemical Wedding* took place.

Elizabeth and Frederick were forced to flee into exile in such great haste in 1620, when the Hapsburgs brought an end to their rule, that Frederick's treasured jewel, which embodied and symbolised a host of ideas more comprehensive than the object itself, the Order of the Garter, was left behind in the panic. If anything symbolised the Rosicrucian dream of Universal Reformation, it was this. His enemies could hardly have hoped for more, and contemporary Hapsburg propaganda prints mercilessly satirised Frederick, showing him in various states of humiliation with his stocking down, to emphasise the loss of the Garter.¹ The date of 1620 coincides with the end of the Rosicrucian Fraternity in Germany, as this part of Europe descended into the horrors of the Thirty Years War.

Yates writes: 'To the English colouring belongs the name 'Rose Cross', deriving, so I believe, from the red cross of St George and English chivalric traditions. ... In any case, the name of the movement belongs, I believe, into its English side.'²

The sacred mystery of the dying Solar King.

Christ, who came not to destroy but to fulfil, maintained the old tradition of the Rosy Cross - otherwise, of the Ancient Mysteries - and in establishing a new College of Magic did not depart therefrom.³

The essential connection between the ancient Mysteries and Rosicrucianism is that the alchemists appear to have adopted this mythos as a metaphor for the processes of the Great Work. Rosicrucianism, as I have pointed out, is best described as a system of mystical Christian alchemy. One of the fundamental aims of alchemy is to refine that which is base into that which is incorruptible. It is the 'lifting' of Nature. In material terms this related to the process of converting lower Nature (in the form of the base metals) into Nature perfected (gold). In this system, gold is the material form of the

¹ Reproduced in *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.

² Ibid, p.221.

³ Waite, *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, p.255.

incorruptible sun: symbolically they are interchangeable. In order to save those forms / metals below it, the sun / gold must first be sacrificed. As in the Mysteries, it undergoes a sacred marriage, the consequence of which is death, dissolution, and putrefaction. This is also symbolised by Christ's martyrdom, death, entombment, and descent to Hell. Through the course of the processes, the sun / gold is resurrected, bringing with it the rest of family of lower metals. This is symbolised by Christ's Harrying of Hell, Triumph, and the release of the saved souls. Christ is often termed the Stone of the Philosophers. The Stone, frequently in the form of a red powder, is that agent by which, through a repetition of the process, more base metals are converted. It is often also referred to as the Medicine, or the Elixir of Life, by which Nature, including man, is cured of imperfection. The chemical operations that constitute this process are still not properly understood, although the fundamental concept was that some gold was used to create further amounts. In symbolic terms, the perfect unity had to be sacrificed to save the imperfect majority, and it is for this reason that religious and mythological metaphors applied. One of the finest pictorial examples of the process is found in the *Philosophia Reformata* of Mylius, 1622.¹ The best literary example of the allegory of the process is Andreae's *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*. Rossetti's images of solar and lunar marriages, such as *Dantis Amor* and *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* appear to be directly related to this alchemical symbolism.

One of the central themes of Rosicrucianism is the depiction of Christ as the radiant sun of the spirit. In mystical terms, is the purification, or the 'assaying', of the soul. The medium through which this 'assay' is accomplished, is sacred fire, the application of which burns off the dross of the material body in which the ore of the soul is imprisoned, in order that it may be set free and reunite with God. The fire required for this purification is not the coarse fire of the material world, but a sacred spiritual fire. It will be seen that these processes modify the terminology of alchemy into a metaphor for the inward transmutation of the soul. This was the true message of the original manifestos which railed against the 'the ungodly and accursed goldmaking'.² The true process of

¹ See Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy: The Secret Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp.98-107. See also Chapter XI, 'Alchemical Symbolism', in Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp.145-161.

² *Fama*: 'the ungodly and accursed gold-making, which hath gotten so much the upper hand, whereby under colour of it, many runagates and roguish people do use great villanies and cozen and abuse the credit which is given them. Yea nowadays men of discretion do hold the transmutation of metals to be the highest point and *fastigium* in philosophy ... We therefore do by these presents publicly testify, that the true philosophers are far of another mind, esteeming little the making of gold, which is but a

alchemy takes place in the alembic of the philosopher himself; it is the refining and purification of the gold of the soul. In alchemical terms, the child Christ is born within the soul (which corresponds to those ideas expressed in Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*), where it grows until it fills the mystical alchemist with inner light. The path is that which Dante symbolically describes in *The Divine Comedy*, which culminates in his transcendental experience of divine light which was beyond his powers to describe. In short, Christ is the inner sun and the incorruptible gold of the soul. He is the Philosopher's Stone, the Golden Stone to whom the order of chivalry was devoted at the end of Andreae's *Chemical Wedding*. Here we are to understand Christ as an entirely symbolic and mystical concept, an experience rather than a physical being. In Rosicrucian terms, Christ is a mythical symbol standing for an absolute; he is the sum of all things, or, as was written on the tomb of Christian Rosencreutz, *Jesus mihi omnia*, 'Jesus all things to me'.¹ On one level he is the Biblical Jesus of the scriptures, while on another level he transcends this, encapsulating all the wisdom of the Mystery Religions, of which he was but the latest and most perfect example.

Perhaps one of the most important roots of Rosicrucian thought lies in ancient Zoroastrianism. This was a dualistic religion which deified divine light in the material form of the sun, and regarded fire as a sacred element which runs through and animates all creation. The sun is described as being 'swift-horsed', and white horses were sacrificed to Ahura Mazda (or his Greek counterpart Zeus Helios) at Persepolis.² Zoroastrians were known as the 'Children of the Sun', and the symbol of the rosette represented the burning fire of the sun as the 'flower of light': 'it has been suggested that the spreading red petals of the rose were seen as homological to the burning fire of the sun'.³ Evil is personified as darkness and night. When Christianity became established in areas that had in former times held Zoroastrian beliefs, it was natural that Christ should be conflated with the Solar-god as the 'Sun of Righteousness': 'on many Armenian crosses the body of Christ is represented by an intricately worked disk fusing

parergon; for besides that they have a thousand better things': Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.250.

¹ Ibid, p.246.

² James R Russell, 'The Sun in Zoroastrian Culture', in *The Sun in Myth and Art*, compiled by Madanjeet Singh (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), pp.235-249 (p.240).

³ Ibid, p.242.

the shapes of sun and rose, of light and the gently radiant homologous flower of light'.¹ Here we see the use of many of the symbols we have been examining.

The word 'Adonai', used as a form of address for Christ, is from the same source as the name Adonis. Both mean, simply, 'Lord' from the Phoenician 'Adon'. Christ is depicted as the Sun-god in many Rosicrucian illustrations. Perhaps the most perfect example is found in Blake's *Glad Day*, in which Christ is also depicted in the pose of Vitruvian Man, the Renaissance ideal of man as the microcosm of the universe.² Wigston states that Adonis is 'the key figure, or myth centre round which the society of the Rosy Cross and their emblem revolve'.³ This is a reference, not to the specific myth, but the universal concept of the sacrificial death of the God of the Solar Year, whatever name he goes under. Adonis was the beautiful young Sun-god loved by Aphrodite (the Lunar-goddess) who is slain by Mars in the guise of the boar of winter. Adonis was loved, not only by Aphrodite, but also by Persephone (Proserpine), and was ordered by Zeus to share the year divided between these two goddesses. In actual fact, these are but two aspects of the Triple-goddess which represent the increase of the sun's power during the first half of the year, and the decline of his influence during the latter part, as the sun dips into darkness. These are Rossetti's 'powers' of Life and Death. Yet in her hand Persephone holds the pomegranate which holds the multitude of seeds promising the resurrection of new life - the same symbol as Aphrodite's apple of immortality. The dying Sun-god Adonis, slain by the boar of winter, is the death of

¹ Ibid, p.244. Also, p.242: 'In Armenia, a Christian land steeped in older Zoroastrian traditions, the play of sound and symbol between rose (*vard*) and burning (*varr*) sun was used to advantage by mediaeval poets.' The Roman patronage of the Iranian Sun-god Mithra spread these beliefs throughout the Empire, and may well have contributed important symbolic aspects to the Grail legends.

² WB Yeats had a profound interest in Blake, and was involved in the first major work on that artist since the Rossetti brothers had completed Gilchrist's initial monograph: 'Ellis and Yeats believed that Blake had himself been a Rosicrucian initiate; whether or not this was so they rightly believed that they were within the same tradition as that from which Blake had gained his knowledge and derived his symbols': Raine, *Yeats the Initiate*, p.213.

³ Op. cit., p.85. He also writes, p. 127, 'For example, the myth of *Venus and Adonis* is not only Phoenician in its origin (and therefore an early Masonic centre), but is Rosicrucian to its backbone, being the subject of their emblem, a cross and Rose crucified.' Wigston argues that the purpose of the Masonic rites is to preserve a pagan tradition: 'It is just these heathen antiquities and Pagan rites, which it was the aim of the Rosicrucians and Free Masons to shelter, preserve, and hand on as lamps for posterity. Take up any of the thousand books on Freemasonry, and they take one back at once in their histories to the Mysteries - and particularly Virgil's. Here is what a Masonic writer writes upon the purpose and object of Freemasonry:- "In concluding my work, I repeat that the freemason's society was founded for the purpose of concealing the rites of the ancient pagan religion, under the cover of operative masonry; and that, although the religion is extinct, its ceremonials remain, and clearly develop the origin of the institution."' Pp.40-1: author's italics.

vegetation and the old year, by which the earth prepares itself for the new. He is the Year King ritually slaughtered by the tanist who will succeed him. Like Christ, he spills his blood that mankind might be redeemed by the resurrection of new life in the land.

The boar that killed Adonis was Mars - both winter and war are forms of death and the destruction of the old - and it is Mars and also Pluto, who jointly rule the astrological death-sign of Scorpio. Without death there can be no rebirth and regeneration. November, which falls under Scorpio, in the calendar systems of agricultural communities, is the month of death. It is Halloween, or the Celtic fire-festival of Samhain, which marks the end of the old year and the start of the new. In this day of suspension, the 'day without name', caught between the end of the old year and the start of the next, the souls of the dead have access to the phenomenal world.¹

We have already noted the solar connections of St George. St George is one of the central figures of the mumming plays, where he, or his opponent the Saracen, is slain and brought back to life again by the Doctor.² These plays are usually performed at Christmas. Frazer notes the importance of St George's Day (April 23rd) in the context of the Fertility Rites. The central character, Green George, is a vegetation spirit who manifests himself through water and tree symbolism:

The chief figure of the festival is Green George, a lad who is concealed from top to toe in green leaves and blossoms. He throws a few handfuls of grass to the beasts of the tribe, in order that they may have no lack of fodder throughout the year. ... Green George, the human double of the tree, bestows food on the cattle, and further ensures the favour of the water-spirits by putting them in direct communication with the tree.³

¹ This derives from the old calendar system based on thirteen lunar months of twenty-eight days, which results in an extra day, between the old and new years. The number thirteen is judged unlucky because it is at this time, the end of the thirteenth lunar month, that the sun dies at the end of the solar year. This is the day of death, the 'day without name', or the 'unspeakable day', when the sun is symbolically absent. The idea corresponds with Christ's descent into Hell before he is resurrected.

² See Jessie L Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), pp.95-6.

³ *Golden Bough*, p.127. Frazer notes: 'the powers of granting an easy delivery to women and of communicating vital energy to the sick and old are clearly ascribed to the willow'. He adds: 'It is the same spirit which animates the tree and is active in the inferior plants and which we have recognised in the May-tree and the Harvest-May. ... The procession with this representative of the divinity was supposed to produce the same beneficial effects on the fowls, the fruit-trees, and the crops as the presence of the deity himself. In other words, the mummer was regarded not as an image but as an actual representative of the spirit of vegetation; hence the wish expressed by the attendants on the May-

In the May Day festivals, the consort of the May Queen is the Green Man, that is, the resurrected spirit of vegetation, of which Green George is an example. May Day represents the occasion of their Sacred Marriage which ensures the regeneration of Nature. The Green Knight in Arthurian legend represents the same figure, who is annually struck down, but cannot die.¹

The Christian myth is no different from those others based upon the death sacrifice of the solar year-king, who gives his life for the continuing good of the world and its people. He offers his life-blood for humanity. Christ is the sacred vine of fertility, the spiritual fermentation of whose fruit produces mystical insight and ecstatic revelation; he is inseparable from Dionysus / Bacchus who is but an aspect of Apollo. But just as the sun dies in the west at the end of each day, so it is resurrected anew each dawn full of new vitality; and the same pattern is repeated in the annual cycle. AE Waite wrote, 'Rosicrucianism is the mystery of that which dies in manifestation that the life of the manifest may be ensured'.² Wigston expands on this idea:

The Rose crucified is, we believe, nothing short of crucified Light or glory. ... Thus from his sacrifice, [Adonis] who, as the sun, is light, we have the idea, in the crucified Rose, of the Saviour's martyrdom.³ ... In short, the crucified Rose is the Christian legend, *extracted from Nature (and as universal as Nature)*, applied symbolically to indicate immortality, or the secret of the creation of the universe, - that is the Logos, or Light, concealed in darkness, - Truth as the Thought of God, hidden yet made manifest, in the works of the creation. This Truth is the archetypal Mind, or meaning of the world. It is the creative idea, or ideas, which are clothed in Nature's art, as a truth may be concealed in a fable, myth, or allegory. ...so is Truth open yet secret, concealed and hidden, according to our capacities.⁴

rose and the May-tree that those who refuse them gifts ... may have no share in the blessings which it is in the power of the itinerant spirit to bestow.' The vegetation spirit may be male or female, and is usually known as the King or Queen. See 'Relics of Tree-Worship in Modern Europe', pp.120-135.

¹ See 'Attis and the Green Man', in Baring and Cashford, *Myth of the Goddess*, pp.410-12. It is Weston's thesis that the Grail myth commemorates the rites of Attis as the spirit of vegetation.

² *The Hermetic papers of AE Waite: The Unknown Writings of a Modern Mystic*, ed. by RA Gilbert (Wellingborough, Northants: Aquarian Press, 1987), p.136.

³ Op. cit., p.102.

⁴ Ibid, p.103.

When we use the expression 'Christianity,' we mean the real *nature meaning* of the divine myth.¹

Thus, the core of the Rosicrucian theology - or rather, theosophy, - can be seen to be a mixture of the universal fertility myth and Platonism re-interpreted within a mystical and alchemical Christian context. The death of God is his birth into a material body, as his blood (light), is poured into darkness (the earth). This is symbolised in the Annunciation, where the light of God is often shown descending into the vessel of the Virgin. Likewise the soul of man. This is the inversion that we find expressed in Rossetti's sonnets, of death in life, and life in death: light dies into life in matter; life dies out of matter into light. There is a constant cycle of an overflow and descent of light into matter, which it inhabits for a period before it again re-ascends back to the source. Thus what is life on earth is death to light, and vice-versa. The *mors osculi* of the Goddess is the liberation of the soul to eternal life in light.

The Virgin Mother of God.

While the Rosicrucian emphasis is most often placed upon Christ as the mystic Sun, the duality of the system dictates that he does not stand alone. As in Rossetti's *Dantis Amor*, the Sun of Christ in one corner is balanced by the Moon of Beatrice in the other. Sun and Moon circle each other like the eternal lovers that they are. They represent the inseparable principles of alchemical Rosicrucianism. The imagery is founded on cycles; life and death, light and darkness, etc. If the sun is the epitome of sacred fire, then its counterpart is the moon and water. And if the Sun-god dies annually, he must in turn be re-born again from somewhere. It stands that he must have a Mother.

The answer to the mysteries is the all-important symbol of the Tree. As Waite explains: 'The name of Rosy Cross refers to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the Tree and to the pouring forth of His blood thereon. This sacrifice was typified in all Ancient Mysteries'.² In the cycle of redemption, the cross in the Christian myth was

¹ Ibid, p.105. Author's italics.

² *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, p.571.

traditionally made from the wood of that tree in Eden which had been the cause of the Fall. It was the Tree of Life and of Knowledge, the apple tree.¹ Here we see a return to the motif of death we earlier examined in Rossetti's *Orchard Pit*. It is on the apple Tree that Christ is crucified.

But the Sun-god is also born upon the Apple Tree. All solar-gods are also vegetation-gods. It is upon this that the mysteries of life and death are enacted. All trees originally belonged to the Goddess; they are a symbol of matter - matter always being feminine and ruled by the moon. The Greek word *hyle* means both 'matter' and 'wood'. Therefore the symbol of the Orchard is the 'wood', or generative matter of the Lunar Apple-goddess, Diana of the Groves. Graves writes that 'Apollo was also the ghost of the sacred king who had eaten the apple - the word *Apollo* may be derived from the root *abol*, "apple"'.² The apple-tree features in the Song of Solomon:

As the apple tree among the trees of the wood,
So is my beloved among the sons.
I sat down under his shadow with great delight,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.³

¹ In Genesis, the Tree of Knowledge is that from which Adam and Eve eat the fruit. The Tree of Life is not the same tree, and Adam and Eve do not partake of this, which is why mankind remains mortal. The Apple Tree is therefore also the source of death in mankind ('for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die': Gen. 2.17), and human nature therefore remains only half divine. However, in the mythology from which Genesis draws (and then distorts), there is but one Tree, of which the fruit bestows both knowledge *and* immortality. I refer here to a single Tree. The serpent promises 'ye shall be as gods' (Gen. 3.5) and God says, 'Behold, the man is become as one of us' (Gen. 3.22). The Neoplatonic and Rosicrucian quest was indeed to become a God.

² *Greek Myths*, p.57. In *The White Goddess*, p.257, he adds, 'Whether the word *Apol* is a chance approximation to Apollo, who is the immortal part of Dionysus, or whether the apple is named after him, is a doubtful point'. It seems from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, that Dionysus took over the role of Diana Nemorensis, becoming 'a god of trees in general'. He writes, p.387; 'Thus we are told that almost all the Greeks sacrificed to "Dionysus of the Tree." In Boeotia one of his titles was "Dionysus in the tree"'. He adds that images of the god were either placed in trees, or show him appearing from trees. 'He was the patron of cultivated trees: prayers were offered to him that he would make the trees grow; and he was especially honoured by husbandmen, chiefly fruit growers, who set up an image of him, in the shape of a natural tree-stump, in their orchards. He was said to have discovered all tree-fruits, amongst which apples and figs are particularly mentioned; and he was referred to as "well-fruited," "he of the green fruit," and "making the fruit to grow."' He adds, p.388: 'Like other gods of vegetation Dionysus was believed to have died a violent death, but to have been brought back to life again; and his sufferings, death, and resurrection were enacted in his sacred rites.' The winnowing fan is also 'among the emblems of Dionysus'. Christ and Dionysus, in this role of vegetation-god, are both symbolised as the Vine and the Green Man.

³ 2.3

The apple is a symbolic representation of the Sun-god Apollo, who is born, or rather resurrected, from this tree, which is the Tree of Life. In alchemical symbolism, the resurrected androgyne is often shown accompanied by a tree bearing solar and / or lunar fruit.¹ Thus the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death are one and the same: both represent the Mother of God. Eve is the Apple-goddess of Eden, who in Genesis is at first nameless, but, we are told was so named by Adam, 'because she was the mother of all living'.² She is the primordial Lunar-goddess of life and death.

Thus the symbol of the Tree is the parable or metaphor for what the descending part of the divine godhead enters in order to be generated into matter. It is also that upon which he later dies from matter and re-ascends to the divine godhead. This is the Rosicrucian mystery of the cycle of light, the mythical form of which is merely a parable for a mystical truth.

In modern English, we may play on the word 'eve' as 'the day or night before', or 'evening'. The Evening Star, Hesperus, - Venus - is the triple-goddess of the apple-garden in the west, the Hesperides. Thus we have these ideas conjoined: evening, Venus, apples, and the west, where the sun sinks to rest in a rosy glow. Similarly, the Morning Star is also Venus who heralds the rising sun, born from the rosy glow in the east each dawn. Thus, symbolically, we have a compound image of the birth and the death, or the death and resurrection of the sun each day, as it rises from, and returns to, the Goddess of the Apples, Diana Nemorensis, who is the anima of the Tree of Life. The apples that are born of her are Apollo, the Sun-god, and, one presumes, she must bear one apple for each day of the solar year. The god that is born of the Tree dies upon the Tree. The goddess that gives life also takes life.³ In the Christian myth, Mary, the New Eve (who is always Lunar), gives life to Christ, just as in the Pieta, it is she who

¹ See the illustrations from Mylius's *Philosophia Reformata*, referred to earlier.

² Genesis 3.20.

³ It should also be stated, that although the apple-tree takes prime status within our tradition, all fruit-bearing trees, especially the citrus trees and the fig, carry the same symbolism. The Tree of Eden is not specified as an apple-tree - in fact it was probably mythologically a fig-tree. The orange-tree is probably a better example of the Tree-of-the-Solar-Fruit, with its dark leaves and glowing spheres. Rossetti pictures Lucrezia Borgia as the Goddess of Death in *Lucrezia Borgia*, 1871. In this fascinating painting, she is shown washing her hands in the handbasin of Venus, under which is shown an orange-tree growing from a large container, which is decorated with a red snake. She has just poisoned her husband, who is seen in the mirror behind her - another symbol of lunar Venus - and watches as he succumbs to its effects. Precisely the opposite applies in Botticelli's *Primavera*, in which Venus is shown surrounded by orange trees bearing their golden fruit. Another painting, which illustrates the importance placed on the apple-tree by the Aesthetic School, is John Melhuish Strudwick's *When Apples Were Golden*.

takes him back into herself. This is why Adam is moulded from (Mother) earth. This is why Christ is essentially a vegetation-god. This is why Adonis is killed by the boar of winter. All solar and vegetation gods enact this sequence of death and resurrection. And the central icon of this motif is the Tree of Life.

Another sequence, popular with the Aesthetic school of artists, depicts the sun rising from the sea in the east accompanied by a rosy glow and the Morning Star, rising to its full glory in the midheavens at noon, before falling to rest in the sea in the west accompanied by the rosy glow of evening and the Evening Star. The Great Mother is symbolically the sea who gives birth to and takes back the dying sun each day.¹ Alternatively, if this takes place over land, - mountains are a familiar and popular Rosicrucian motif, - this may be taken to mean Mother Earth. These motifs may be found throughout Rossetti's poetry. Where Rossetti tentatively and uneasily dabbles with Christianity, it is not Christ he depicts, but Mary as Lunar-goddess.

The sequence we have been examining is set out by Rossetti at the start of the *House of Life*, where, in *The Sonnet*, he introduces us to this lunar motif of Life, Love, and Death. The Goddess gives life to the Sun, loves him at the height of his powers, and takes him back to herself. At the mid-point of this sequence, when the Sun-god is at his zenith, and directly above the Mother, - either sea or earth, - he fertilises her before dying, in order that she may bear a new son the next year to repeat the cycle. The ageless myth of the Goddess and her Son-lover forms the basis behind the greater part of occidental religion and magic. This is the symbolic cycle of the sacred marriage of the sun and moon that ensures the continuance of all life on earth. This is why the rose of light is said to be crucified on the cross of matter, for the light of the sun, whether spiritual or actual, cannot survive in matter, and in his union sacrifices both himself and his divinity in the desire for union. The moment of procreation is the moment of death, but this death is the divine sacrifice through which both procreation and resurrection occur. Wigston states: 'The act of creation is its crucifixion. For it is buried in the Art of Nature.'² Also: 'this is typical of Adonis crucified in the Heavens at the vernal

¹ It is of interest to note that the island of Rhodes marks the place where Helios Apollo rose from the waters of the sea. The famous Colossus was his giant image in his sanctuary there. Classical coins from the island show the profile of the god on one side, and on the other, a rose, which was the symbol of the island. The name of the island is from the Greek 'rhodus', meaning Rose. Thus here we have a clear association of the Rose with Apollo. Zeus had given the island to Apollo who had seen it rising from the waters of the sea as he passed overhead. Rhodus was also the son of Poseidon and Aphrodite.

² Bacon, *Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, p.106.

equinox.¹ The Goddess is the matrix of the physical universe, and her son / sun is the motivating spirit within. The cross of matter, in this case, is the cross of the solar year.

This is the mythic basis of the central symbol. But it also appears with quite another emphasis placed upon it, to such an extent that it often seems unrecognisable as the same theme. This is the icon of the sacred mother and child, or, in Christian terms, The Virgin and Child Jesus. This is one of the most important primary images of Aesthetic symbolism. In his painting, Rossetti hardly appears to treat this theme at all, although it is there in another guise in his poetry. In the art of the Aesthetic School, the theme of the holy child (symbolising the state of sacred innocence of the soul) is repeated over and again. Hunt's *The Triumph of the Innocents*, 1876-87, is a major early example of this theme. Rossetti, instead, prefers to adhere to a pre-Christian context, repeatedly expressing the theme through allusion to the fertility myth. All those familiar paintings of 'florid women' - that is, female figures bedecked in blooms and greenery - testify to this. Children, with the exception of Jane Morris's two girls, were not a popular subject with Rossetti, and when he does use them, he invariably records the difficulty he has had in dealing with them as sitters. Millais, in contrast, instituted the 'cult of the child', which became a distinctive feature of Aesthetic art.

The child is not only a symbol of holy innocence, but also, on another level, - a symbol within a symbol, - represents in a Platonic and alchemical context, the state of spiritual potential within the soul. This is how Rossetti expresses it as an intellectual concept in his verse. Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*, is a perfect example of Love as the child of the soul. In Sonnet 40, *Stillborn Love*, Rossetti illustrates the loss of this potential. This use of the motif of the sacred child expresses the birth and growth of the alchemical 'Mystic Christ' within the individual. For Rossetti, in both his painting and poetry, Love replaces the figure of Christ. This is an important motif, because it represents not the singular historical Jesus of the Testaments, but the individual 'Christ potential' within each person, very much in the manner described by Blake. It is the aim of every human, in the true Renaissance and Rosicrucian mode, not simply to emulate Christ, but to become Christ. To become God. By developing our own personal godheads, our aim is, as in Plato (and all other transcendentalists), to free oneself from the material and physical constraints of the body, and return to the divine source which is expressed in

¹ Ibid, p.94.

terms of light symbolism. Thus we are all the holy child, and have the holy child of love and light within our souls, and as such, we are all the children of the great Universal Mother. As the Solar-god is born from and dies into the Mother, so we, as potential Christs, are also children of the Mother. She is a universal symbol, and a symbol of the universe. The Renaissance symbol of the Virgin and Child must always be considered in the context of the Mother Goddess holding her child Humanity in her hands. This icon may be understood to exist in either a pagan or a Christian context, and is common to both.

In alchemic symbolism, the Great Mother is symbolised as a great sow (borrowed from Celtic mythology) suckling her copious offspring. She is sometimes also similarly pictured as a lioness. But by far the most familiar image is that of the Pelican feeding her young on her own blood. This symbol is extremely common in church ornamentation of all kinds in the nineteenth century, and stands for Christ's self-sacrifice for the salvation of humanity. Burne-Jones executed a particularly fine design of this motif for stained glass, the cartoon of which is now in the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.¹

This image, however commonly applied to Christ, is properly a symbol of the Great Mother. It is a lunar, and not a solar, symbol. The Pelican is white and a bird of the waters, over which the moon has control. It shares its symbolism with the swan and the goose, which, as we have seen, are the birds of Isis, Aphrodite, and Venus. This attribute of control over the waters, was inherited by the Virgin Mary, the root of whose name is 'sea', and who as 'Stella Maris', 'Star of the Sea', is the patron saint of sailors and fishermen. In mediaeval times, the Pelican was believed to feed its young on its own blood, and because of this was taken to be the supreme symbol of devotional self-sacrifice. Thus it was used in a Christian context to denote Christ's blood-sacrifice - the sacrifice of the Solar-king - for humanity's sake. This, however, is to misunderstand the symbol and has arisen as a result of a gender-change in the symbol itself. As a lunar symbol, it represents the renewal of the moon. The mature Pelican stands for the full

¹ Rossetti uses the symbol of the Pelican in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, comparing Coleridge to the bird:

But his warm Heart, the mother-bird, above
Their callow fledgling progeny still hove
With tented roof of wings and fostering breast
Till the Soul fed the soul-brood. Richly blest
From Heaven their growth, whose food was Human Love.

moon, which before it dies, feeds its children (the new moons to come), upon itself. It passes its own blood (the blood-line) directly from itself to its children, without recourse to any other source. It represents matrilinear parthenogenic reproduction, or self-renewal without the need for a male. Thus the Goddess is totally independent, and always remains virgin. This is the mystery of the Virgin Mother.¹ The snake is the guardian of the apple-tree because it represents the same process: it sheds its skin as a symbol of the death from which it always emerges alive and renewed. It is thus a symbol of the Life-spirit. The ouroboros similarly represents the perpetual self renewal of time - that is, the cycles of the year.

Our starting point for all such symbol-systems must be a return to the idea of Eve as 'the mother of all living' - Eve as the original Goddess of the earth from whom Adam is formed; Eve as the Apple-goddess who confers wisdom and immortality; Eve as Diana Nemorensis, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, and Mary; Eve as the Virgin Mother of God and all humanity.

The Lily and the Rose.

One of the great strengths of the Rosicrucian system was the ambiguity of the symbolism involved. One of the fundamental points inherent in the Rosicrucian system - despite the extreme anti-Papal rantings of the original Fraternity - was its desire to establish a union of opposites. Bruno, whom I regard as the spiritual father of

¹ Queen Elizabeth I, from the court of whom much Rosicrucian symbolism derived, wove around herself a complex allegory in which she represented the Virgin Queen (in clear Lunar symbolism), presiding over her Court of Heaven. She had jewels made of the Pelican and the Phoenix, both of which represent parthenogenic renewal, and which were intended to represent her role as the Great Mother of her realm. Elizabeth Stuart took these traditions with her to the court of Bohemia, and when she married the Elector Palatine, symbolically on St Valentine's Day, John Donne, in his *Epithalamion* of the event, depicted the couple as the Sun and Moon, a pair of alchemical Phoenixes, in whose union, 'Nature again restored is'.

The symbol of the Pelican also has an important place in Freemasonry, as King states: 'Perhaps the most occult of all masonic rites were those that proclaimed a Rosicrucian origin, among them the ancestor of the present Rose + Croix - the eighteenth degree of the Ancient and Accepted Rite of Masonry. Members of this rite wore an apron and a collar which incorporated the pelican, the bird which, in legend, feeds its young on its own blood. The non-masonic Rose + Croix of the Paris of the 1890s also used the pelican as a symbol, but is better known for the incorporation of the magical symbol of the elemental pentagram into the Rose Cross.' Francis King, *Magic: The Western Tradition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p.112. Waite, in *Brotherhood*, p.573, states that the Societas Rubeae Crucis 'adopted the symbolic jewel of the Order in its higher Grades - namely a pelican in its piety, typical of the Great Mysteries'.

Rosicrucianism, sought a system of religion freed from the extreme and bloody schisms that were then so bitterly dividing Europe. He sought a theosophy, in which the bases of all religions could be found. Looking back at the various forms of Rosicrucianism, we find many seemingly irreconcilable contradictions; was it Protestant (it was originally), or was it Catholic (Digby, Waite and the symbolism of Anglo-Catholicism suggest this), or was it occult (it has a firm basis within the magical tradition); was it Christian (it has always loudly proclaimed that it was Christ-centred), or was it Pagan (many forms, including Rossetti's, display a strong pagan emphasis); was it founded on a female deity (the Mother of God often appears to take precedence), or a male (again, Christ is always proclaimed its Master)? My own conclusion can only be that the Renaissance Neoplatonist approach is best adopted on such occasions: where more than one alternative presents itself, accept all options - if they are contradictory (and they often were, and remain so), no matter, accept them all. Thus I consider Rosicrucianism to be a central theosophy, from which we may draw our own emphasis of belief depending upon our own individual standpoint. The inscription in the tomb of Christian Rosencreutz holds the solution we are seeking: 'Jesus mihi omnia', 'Jesus, all things to me'.

I am forced to confront this question, because many of the symbols we are examining have ambiguous interpretations. In the previous section, we have observed how the major symbol of the Pelican may be interpreted as either Christ, or the Virgin Mother. The primal Rosicrucian symbols of the Lily and the Rose are another case in point. Do they refer to Mary Virgin or to Christ? In the poetry of Christina Rossetti, for example, the lily and the rose sometimes have a female context, and at other times refer to Jesus. The Rose may refer to Mary as representative of the Goddess, or it may refer to Christ as the 'flower of light'. For instance, Wigston writes:

The Rose plays a double symbolic part, according as we take it physically or metaphysically. In the former sense it is the secret flower of Venus, the emblem of the mysteries of love, - the sign of creation in a human sense. In the latter sense, it is creation in the Divine (crucified) meaning.¹

¹ Op. cit., pp.103-4.

By which he means the Rose of Light crucified on the cross of the solar year. Wigston also writes:

The Lily and the Rose are two purely Rosicrucian flowers particularly associated with the order. The Fleur-de-lis is connected with the symbol of Light, as Lux, and the Rose is Adonis.¹

While this statement certainly reflects Victorian Rosicrucian ideology, if we turn to the original Rosicrucian alchemists, the Rose represents an alchemical principal based on Venus, who has always been symbolised by the Rose. In fact, the symbol of the Rosicrucian rose often takes the form of the symbol for the planet Venus, a circle surmounting an equal armed cross, in which the circle becomes the bloom, and the cross is formed by the intersection of stem with a single leaf on each side. This is to be seen in Rossetti's paintings. Rossetti, who always professed a profound admiration for Christ, nonetheless always - and I underline the always - places a feminine, and usually pre-Christian (i.e. pagan), emphasis on his spiritual symbolism.

An ambiguity that occurs again and again concerns the gender of the god or goddess to which such symbols apply. The simple answer to this, in most cases, is that in early mythology, it is the Lunar-goddess who takes precedence over the Solar-god.² This was largely based on the difference in the Middle East between fixed agricultural communities who saw the earth on which they depended as an all-providing Mother, and calculated time in lunar months, and the culture of nomadic herdsmen who wandered the barren and inhospitable near desert, who preferred to believe in a severe solar warrior-god. The first group relies on growth for survival; the second, on death. This is symbolised in the Biblical stories of Cain and Abel, and Esau and Jacob. When the emphasis shifted to patriarchal deities - and this at different times within different cultures - we find that a male deity will usurp the role formerly the function of a female deity, and appropriate her symbols. An example of this is Dionysus assuming the role

¹ Ibid, p.89.

² Graves, in *Greek Myths*, p.156, states: 'The Sun's subordination to the Moon, until Apollo usurped Helios's place and made an intellectual deity of him, is a remarkable feature of early Greek myth'. He adds, p.157: 'A gold ring from Tiryns and another from the Acropolis at Mycenae prove that the goddess controlled both the moon and the sun, which are placed above her head.' He also states: 'Rhodes was the property of the Moon-goddess Danae ... until she was extruded by the Hittite Sun-god Tesup': *ibid*.

formerly held by Diana Nemorensis, appropriating her orchards and wheel (though this still lingered on as the attributes of the demoted goddess in the figures of Fortuna and St Catherine) and the winnowing fan. The Lily and the Rose are also examples of such symbols passing from a female to a male deity.

The Rose, in all contexts, has one underlying meaning - Love.¹ On top of this it has the added meanings of the Goddess of Love, of whom it has always been an attribute; Mary, who inherited this title and function; and the Sun, who is the Sun of Love. In Rossetti's work, the Rose generally applies to Aphrodite, or her counterparts. Even in his verse, where the Rosicrucian influence is at its most obvious, and where Rossetti directly equates the Sun with Love - as for instance in Sonnet 43, *Love and Hope*: 'Love's golden head / Sole sunshine of the imperishable land' - he does not equate the symbol of the Rose with the Sun.

Venus often appears in alchemical symbolism, in which the term 'Rose Garden' is a form of code, as Frances Yates explains:

The rose is an alchemical symbol; many alchemical treatises have the title *Rosarium*, or rose garden. It is a symbol of the Virgin, and more generally a mystical religious symbol, whether in Dante's vision or in Jean de Meung's *Roman de la Rose*.²

In fact Jean de Meung was a Hermetic practitioner, and wrote two works on the theme entitled *Nature's Remonstrances to the Alchemist*, and *The Alchemist's Answer to Nature*.³ In a poetic sense - the *Roman de la Rose* included - the Rose, as the 'Queen of Flowers', can only be feminine in nature.

In the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis, there is some ambiguity as to whom the symbol of the Rose belongs, and this perhaps marks a transition in the gender-change of the symbol. The Rose has always been the symbol of Aphrodite, but in this myth roses - or alternatively anemones - are said to have sprung up where his dying blood touched the earth. A variation on this myth says that the rose was originally white, but that as

¹ Alchemically, it refers to the perfection of Nature. But as Nature is the material form of the Goddess, its perfection is likewise an abstract conception approximating to Platonic Love.

² *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.65. Again, the Rose-garden represents Nature Perfected, or Paradise Regained.

³ Waite, *Real History*, p.13.

Aphrodite rushed to the aid of her dying lover, she was caught by thorns and her blood stained the rose red. In either case the symbolism is of blood, and the context is one of sacred sacrifice. The colours red and white are those of the Rosy-Cross:

And in his blood that on the ground lay spill'd, (1167)
A purple flower sprung up, chequer'd with white.
Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood
Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.

Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*.

In the Rosicrucian philosopher Michael Maier's famous work, *Atalanta Fugiens*,¹ alchemical allegory is set to music.² Fugue XXVII is entitled *He That Striveth to Enter the Philosopher's Rose-Garden Without the Key is Likened unto a Man That Would Walk Without Feet*. The words run, 'Wisdom's Rose-garden flourishes with blossoms of divers kinds; but the door thereof is ever closed with fast bars'.³ The use of music is an important factor in Rosicrucian magic and alchemy, and is most probably derived from Ficino's use of the Orphic Hymns as an incantatory method of invocation.

The combination of *The Roman de la Rose* and the alchemical Rose-Garden may provide us with a better understanding of Rossetti's painting of the same title, dated 1864⁴ (Fig.12). The angel on the right who is playing a lyre, wears a white dress decorated with red roses, and this figure corresponds closely with the depiction of Venus in alchemical illustrations, where she is sometimes shown covered in such roses to denote the red stage of the work flowering out of the white - thus denoting a chemical procedure (Fig.13). Also one is reminded of Christian Rosencreutz with his white coat and his red roses. On the golden background of Rossetti's painting are

¹ The full title reads: 'Atalanta Fleeing, that is to say, New Emblems of the Secrets of Chymical Nature: Adapted partly to the eyes and partly to the understanding, in copper-plates, with the addition of sentiments, epigrams and notes; partly to the ears and the refreshment of the mind, in about 50 fugues for three voices, whereof two are fitted to one simple tune, well suited to singing couplets; the whole most excellently pleasant to see, read, meditate, understand, judge, sing and hear'. The distinctive spelling of 'Atalanta' here cannot help but remind us of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*.

² 'It is ... not unreasonable to assume that this theme may be a varied form of some tune having alchemical associations, and the fact of its constant use may be taken as symbolical of the elusive formula for which the alchemist ceaselessly sought': FH Sawyer, 'The Music in "Atalanta Fugiens"', in Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, pp. 281-289 (p.282).

³ Ibid, p.286.

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 126 R.1. Tate Gallery.

shown sun-discs and dotted circles which represent the universal unity. This area, which the angel inhabits, and which is separated from the lovers in the foreground by a rose-latticed fence, represents the perfection of Heaven, and the sacred Red Rose is shown in the upper left-hand corner. In the shallow foreground (the inferior world) the lovers kiss. The girl wears a white sur-coat which is decorated with golden sun-spirals and the heraldic motif for ermine, the sign of royal blood. Beneath this she is wearing a green under-dress, which tells us that she represents Nature. The cuffs are decorated with three white dots which denote the lunar trinity and on her shoulder is a red badge on which is a golden rose ensigned by a gold crown, thus showing that she is the earthly representative, or emanation, of the sacred Rose. A trinity is here shown; earthly beloved, angelic presence, and the godhead of the Rose in Heaven. Her lover is thus in the process of inner transformation through the agency of Love. On the scabbard of the lover's sword is Rossetti's simple Rosicrucian motif, OXOXO. In a slightly differing form, this design was originally intended to be the frontispiece of *The Early Italian Poets*, but was later modified into a watercolour painting. In the original drawing for the frontispiece,¹ the Rose in the top left-hand corner clearly displays a cross in its centre, and the grid behind the lovers contains alternate motifs of hearts and circles containing a diagonal cross. The lover's scabbard bears the OXOXO motif.

In several other paintings, which include *Fair Rosamund*,² *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*,³ and *St George and the Princess Sabra*,⁴ Rossetti uses a specific type of rose motif which is identifiably Rosicrucian in character. This is the symbolic representation of the Rose in the form of the astrological sign for Venus. Just such a rose may be found on the title page of *Summum Bonum - True Magic, Cabala, Alchemy, of the True Brothers of the Rose Cross*, published in Frankfurt in 1629 (Fig.14). The author of this work was Joachim Frizias, although it is generally believed that Robert Fludd had a hand in the work, if he did not indeed write the whole.⁵

The Rose plays an important part in Cabalistic magic as Waite explains:

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 125, plate 191. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

² Surtees Cat. no. 128, plate 198. National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 109, plate 156. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 151, plate 219. Tate Gallery.

⁵ See Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.102.

Speaking of the four quarters of heaven, the Zohar says that an angel is set over each - Michael on the right hand, Gabriel on the left, Auriel in front and Raphael behind. In the midst of all is Shekinah, to whom the symbol of the Rose is especially consecrated. The meeting points of lines drawn from each of the four quarters are obviously the centre of the Cross; and the Rose on the Cross of pure untinctured Kabbalism - if Kabbalism recognised the Cross - would be that of the Shekinah. ... the Zohar recognises an identical middle point from which the four quarters of heaven are equidistant, and that point is the Rose of its own system - that is to say, the Rose of Shekinah.¹

It will be seen how these ideas relate to the quaternary discussed earlier in conjunction with the solar year and the Rosy Cross of St George. These ideas form the basis of the western tradition of ritual magic, and an example of this type of occultism is shown in the shrine of the secret altar and the beryl stone in *Rose Mary*.

In Christian Cabalism, this central Rose is the Rose of Christ, as Waite states: 'The Rose on the Cross, the Holy Rose which is Christ is, however, a perfect blossom', and the aim of all Christian mystics is to undergo a 'conversion from the stained and trampled rose of our fallen humanity to another Rose of the Christhood'.² This is precisely the theme of three of Rossetti's artworks; *Mary Magdalene*, *Hesperia Rosa*, and *Found*. It also occurs in *Jenny*, 'Fresh flower, scarce touched', in which Rossetti uses the symbolism of the rose and lily:

What, Jenny, are your lilies dead?
Aye, and the snow-white leaves are spread
Like winter on the garden-bed.
But you had roses left in May, -
They were not gone too. Jenny, nay,
But must your roses die, and those
Their purpled buds that should uncloze?
Even so; the leaves are curled apart,

¹ *The Hermetic Papers of AE Waite*, pp.159-60.

² *Ibid*, p.159.

Still red as from the broken heart,
And here's the naked stem of thorns. (St. 9)

Like a rose shut in a book
In which pure women may not look,
For its base pages claim control
To crush the flower within the soul... (St. 23)

The rest of this passage continues the metaphor.

In Browning's *Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books*, the Rose is far from fallen; the poem concludes with an overwhelming personal experience of the Rose which eclipses all those impenetrable seventeenth century tomes on mysticism:

And in there breaks the sudden rose herself, (40)
Over us, under, round us every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all, -
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.¹

This experience is similar to Rossetti's *Beauty's Pageant*.

Both Ruskin and Rossetti make connections between the rose and their own names. I have already shown how Rossetti's monogram reflected the 'rosette' of his name, and it was often applied in red in his paintings. William notes, 'The name Rossetti might be translated into "Ruddykins" or "Redkins" as an English equivalent', being derived from the 'florid complexion and reddish hair' of their ancestral stock.² John Hookham Frere, friend and patron of Gabriele Rossetti, invariably spelt the name with only one 's' -

¹ The poem concludes with the image of a Rosicrucian angel of the same sort that appears in Rossetti's *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*:

your own boy-face o'er the finer chords
Bent, following the cherub at the top
That points to God with his paired half-moon wings.

² *Letters and Memoir*, I, 4-5.

‘Rosetti’ - as if to emphasise the ‘rose’ element: Waller notes that ‘Frere never spells the name correctly’.¹

Ruskin - whose name is so similar in sound to ‘ruddykins’ - is derived from a mediaeval diminutive of Rose (I here ignore the Gaelic root).² There seems little doubt that this is why Ruskin - ‘little rose’ - adopted the rose as his personal emblem, using it on the title pages of his published works.³ He may perhaps also have understood it in the sense of ‘kin of the rose’. I have already noted that Ruskin copied this motif from Botticelli’s *Primavera*. Here he explains why:

And I copied this vignette from Sandro Botticelli, for two reasons: first, that no man has ever yet drawn, and none is likely to draw for many a day, roses as well as Sandro has drawn them; secondly, because he was the only painter of Italy who thoroughly felt and understood Dante; and the only one also who understood the thoughts of Heathens and Christians equally, and could in a measure paint both Aphrodite and the Madonna. So that he is, on the whole, the most universal of painters.⁴

The most important point to be extracted from this convoluted explanation - and one can hardly be convinced that no one has equalled Botticelli in drawing roses - is the insistence on the ‘thoughts of Heathens and Christians equally’ being encapsulated in the symbol of the rose standing for ‘both Aphrodite and the Madonna’ alike. This typifies Rosicrucian symbolic ambiguity. The symbol of the rose was of such importance to Ruskin that he notes: ‘I drew it on the wood myself, and Mr Burges cut it; and it is on all my title-pages, because whatever I now write is meant to help in founding the society called of “Monte Rosa”’.⁵

¹ *The Rossetti Family*, p.106.

² It is also of interest that ‘Rose’, besides being named from the flower, also shares a root with the old Germanic *hroth*, meaning ‘fame’, and it is quite probable that the author of the first Rosicrucian manifesto, *Fama*, was aware of this pun. The Gaelic root of Ruskin is from the family occupational name, *na Rusgain*, or *na Rusgairean*, meaning ‘the peelers of bark’, or ‘tanners’.

³ This device may also have held associations for Ruskin of his love for Rose la Touche. His state of mind at the time would almost certainly have dictated his making the connection between the ‘rose’ elements of both their names.

⁴ *Fors Clavigera*, II, letter 22: *The Works of Ruskin*, XXVII, 371.

⁵ *Ibid.*

It is my belief that Rosicrucianism was at the heart of Ruskin's social philanthropy. His most notable project took the title of The Guild of St George, and when the Ruskin Society of Manchester asked his permission to use the name of St George in its title, he replied:

I can at once assure you that the taking of the name of St George *would* give me endless trouble, and cause all manner of mistakes, and perhaps even legal difficulties.

But I think you might with grace and truth take the name of the Society of the Rose - meaning the English wild rose - and that the object of the society would be to promote such English learning and life as can abide where it grows. You see it is the heraldic sign on my books, so that you might still keep pretty close to me.¹

In Rosicrucian symbolism, the Lily often appears in close conjunction with the Rose.² As Wigston rightly stated, they are 'flowers particularly associated with the order'; they provide the distinguishing Rosicrucian colours of red and white. But here I have to disagree with Wigston that the Lily, as the fleur-de-lis, is the symbol of light. The Lily is not the fleur-de-lis; the iris, or yellow flag, is.³ The yellow flag is a sun symbol, the 'flower of light'. The white Lily is always a lunar flower, a symbol of virginity and purity. It also symbolises fertility, regeneration and immortality. It is the symbol, particularly, of Mary Virgin ('Madonna Lily'), the archangel Gabriel, and Florence. It is also sometimes used as a symbol of death.

Although examples can be found of the Lily and the Rose having either all feminine connotations, or alternatively all masculine associations, in alchemy they stand for the principles of creative duality known as 'the faire White Woman married to the Ruddy

¹ *Arrows of the Chace*: *ibid*, XXIV, 539.

² An interesting example of this can be seen in the House of Commons, where the wallpaper, designed by Pugin, bears a prominent design of these flora. Thus they exist at the very heart of the British nation.

³ Roger Phillips, *Wild Flowers of Britain* (London: Pan, 1977), p.76, states: 'Iris is the Greek word for 'rainbow'. To the Greeks it symbolised life and resurrection and is associated with Osiris, the first Pharaoh to become immortal. Also thought to be the source of the fleur-de-lys symbol of French royalty, although it is not clear to which species this refers.' Baker, *Discovering the Folk-lore of Plants*, p.82, relates how the iris probably became the basis of the fleur-de-lys when it was adopted by Clovis, King of the Franks, when its presence revealed a ford and allowed his army to escape the Goths.

Man', or 'the *Red Man* and hys *Whyte Wyfe*'.¹ Read states: 'The King is clad in red and the Queen in white, or blue, and their alternative symbols are often a red rose and a white lily.'² Rossetti's *Dantis Amor* perfectly depicts this universal duality of sun and moon as creative principles. The red and white equal-armed cross of St George is a sign of these dualities unified and held in balance, and is thus a symbolic model of the universe.³

Other artworks in which these symbols appear together are *Mary Nazarene*, 1857,⁴ in which Mary is depicted planting a lily and a rose, and *The Annunciation*, 1861.⁵ They appear in an interesting chivalric context in *The Tune of the Seven Towers*, 1857,⁶ in which the imagery is reminiscent of *The Chemical Wedding*. They appear in a similarly chivalric context in *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors, and Sir Percival were fed with the Sanc Grael*, 1864, which derived from the Oxford Union murals. This painting, which is full of Rosicrucian symbolism, is discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

The Red Cliff and the Hill Summit.

Kenelm Digby gave the following explanation for the title of his influential work, *The Broad Stone of Honour*:

it seemed, that in accordance with the symbolic character which should distinguish all works connected with chivalry, the whole collection might be named *The Broad Stone of Honour*, seeing that it would be a fortress like that

¹ Read, op. cit., p.101. The 'Ruddy Man' is remarkably like William's etymology of the name Rossetti - 'ruddykins'.

² Ibid, p.201. He further defines these figures: 'the King, or Sol, may represent either esoteric 'sophic sulphur' or exoteric gold; and the Queen, or Luna, is 'sophic mercury' in esoteric alchemy and silver in exoteric alchemy'.

³ If the cross of St George is drawn as a square, it will be seen that it is composed of nine smaller squares, four white and five red. The overall square in which they are contained, provides the unifying tenth square. As such, it might be considered a form of the Tetractys. A perfect illustration of this may be found in Dunbar, *Symbolism in Mediaeval Thought*, p.98, entitled 'Reality as Expressed Through [Dante's] Fourfold Method: In ten the oneness, twoness, threeness, fourness, and the Miracle of Nine.' Dunbar unwittingly provides a mystical model for the Rose Cross of St George.

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 87, plate 116. Tate Gallery.

⁵ Surtees Cat. no. 131, plate 200. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

⁶ Surtees cat. no. 92, plate 130. Tate Gallery.

rock upon the Rhine which appears to represent, as it were, knightly perfection, being lofty and free from the infection of a base world; this, indeed, would be lofty, not to represent the height of an arrogant mind, but what St Bernard calls 'the holy and humble elevation of the heart:' it would be broad, not in regard to the way that leadeth to it, which, like that of all divine virtue, is known to be so narrow that few can go in thereat, being the narrow way of those who are called to suffering; it is not the broad road of the world, nor the wide gate that leadeth to its false enchantments; this is straight and narrow, rough and craggy, and hard to climb; ... broad in acknowledging distinctly and broadly the eternal truths of religion, that all men are equal before God; broad in its words, those of plain and holy innocence, and in its sentiments...

Have we not reason then to compare it to a majestic and impregnable fortress? In league with God and with the universe, must it not be for ever triumphant?¹

This provides us with an important motif which we will see held an important place in the art of Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Aesthetic School. The motif consists of a place of perfection high above the baseness of the everyday world, the path to which is steep, narrow, and hard to climb. Digby symbolically pictures it as a fortress of the soul perched on the rock of high ideals. The earlier editions of *Broad Stone* commence with an engraving of a castle set on cliffs beside a wide expanse of water.

In the second volume of *The Germ*, there appeared James Collinson's poem *The Child Jesus*, the second stanza of which begins:

Three cottages that overlooked the sea
Stood side by side eastward of Nazareth.
Behind them rose a sheltering range of cliffs,
Purple and yellow, verdure-spotted, red,
Layer upon layer built up against the sky.²

¹ Kenelm Henry Digby, *The Broad Stone of Honour: Or the True Sense and Practice of Chivalry*, 4 vols (London: Joseph Booker, 1829), I, 5-6.

² 1901 reprint of *The Germ*, p.49.

William comments:

It is singular that Collinson should, throughout his composition, speak of Nazareth as being on the sea-shore - which is the reverse of the fact. The Preraphaelites, with all their love of exact truth to nature, were a little arbitrary in applying the principle; and Collinson seems to have regarded it as quite superfluous to look into a map, and see whether Nazareth was near the sea or not. Or possibly he trusted to Dante Rossetti's poem *Ave*, in which likewise Nazareth is a marine town. My brother advisedly stuck to this in 1869, when I pointed out the error to him: he replied 'I fear the sea must remain at Nazareth: you know an old painter would have made no bones if he wanted it for his background.' I cannot say whether Collinson, if put to it, would have pleaded the like arbitrary and almost burlesque excuse: at any rate he made the blunder, and in a much more detailed shape than in Rossetti's lyric.¹

From what we know of Collinson's almost fanatical religious beliefs, we can safely assume that this was no mistake, but a symbolic motif of such importance as to override the charge of personal error.

In 1853, Charlotte Yonge published her popular novel *The Heir of Redclyffe*. This was read and esteemed within the Morris-Jones circle, in which it had great influence. It is a tale of the struggle of the soul and chivalric self-sacrifice, and refers back to another tale, H de la Motte Fouque's *Sintram and His Companions*, which in turn was inspired by Durer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*.² This latter tale is also an allegory of the conquering of the darker aspects of the soul, fate, and ultimately the Devil. Yonge's tale employs the symbolic motif of high cliffs - the Redclyffe after which the manor is named - which overlook the sea.³ Morris's first poem, influenced by this book, was entitled *The Willow and the Red Cliff*. Similarly, Watts-Dunton's *Aylwin* employs the same motif of cliff and sea, shore, and cliff, the latter playing an important role in this symbolic tale, when it falls upon and buries the malefactor of the piece.

¹ Ibid, Introduction, pp.20-1.

² This allegorical image held a particular significance for Burne-Jones. He kept a copy of it in his room and produced his own version of it, significantly entitled *Sir Galahad*, 1858. The Rose-Cross motif appears on the pommel of Sir Galahad's dagger on the saddle.

³ The real Redcliff Bay is on the Severn Estuary, near Bristol.

All these works carry Rosicrucian associations and overtones. They all employ this motif of cliff and fortress, or cliff and sea, or variations of both. How, then, should we interpret this? The cliff delineates the boundary between sea and land, or the conjunction of horizontal and vertical. In this it carries implications of the cross, in which horizontal and vertical represent space and time in a model of the material universe. The cliff also acts as the interface between the four elements, sea as water, land as earth, air, and sun as fire. This last aspect is significant; as we shall see, the motif of 'the high place' catching the last of the sun's rays and being coloured by the rosy glow, is one that is repeated over and again. The high place, as Digby defines it, is that inhabited by the Rosicrucian. It is the place nearest to God and the sun - that is, the Sun as God. When the sea is involved, this stands for two things; the eternal mother, and the element of the emotions governed by the moon. In *The Heir of Redclyffe*, Yonge employs the motif of the sea as a metaphor for the raging uncontrollability of the passions against which the Rosicrucian must struggle in his quest for the ideal. The sea of the emotions at the base of the cliff stands for the same as Digby's 'infection of a base world'. This motif is used by Rossetti throughout his poetry. He often employs the images of the deep and shadowed place and the struggle of the steep path to the hill summit. Both *The Monochord* and *The Hill Summit* are examples of Rossetti's use of this image in a particularly Rosicrucian manner. Thus the Rosy-coloured 'high place' represents the elevated soul standing in the closest possible proximity to God, even though it still remains a part of this material world. Earlier we noted Ruskin's intention to found 'the society called of "Monte Rosa"'.¹

An example of the sublimity of inspiration engendered by high places (apart from Burke's obvious treatise¹) is found in a work entitled *Histoire de la Magie, du monde Surnaturel et de la Fatalite a travers les Temps et les Peuples*, by Paul Christian, originally published France in 1870.² In this work, Christian uses the term 'Mountain Theology':

¹ Edmund Burke, *On Taste: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1756.

² Translated into English and republished as Paul Christian, *The History and Practice of Magic*, ed. by Ross Nichols, 2 vols (London: Forge Press, 1952). Paul Christian was otherwise known as Jean Baptiste or Christian Pitois.

we feel the reflection in our consciousness of an even brighter radiance from the divine majesty... The ultimate physical altitude of being touches the threshold of that supernatural world, the poetry of our dreams and the future reality of our hopes. It is the Mount Sinai of intelligence, the Mount Tabor of contemplation, the Calvary where faith redeems the blasphemies of the atheist.

It is therefore natural that mountains, hills, and high places in general should have been the first altars of the most ancient of religions, the first schools of transcendental ideas.¹

Jennings notes the 'sublime aspirations' that are the microcosmic inner reflection of Nature's mountains.²

A particularly good example of this type of symbolism is to be found in Hunt's *The Scapegoat*, painted in Palestine, in 1854.³ Hunt has employed wonderful skill in the detail of the mountains in the background. His companion, the Reverend William Beamont describes these mountains: 'The mountains beyond the sea ... under the light of the evening sun, shone in a livery of crimson and gold, except where a floating cloud cast its shadow on their sides.'⁴ Hunt's painting corresponds with Collinson's description in *The Child Jesus*. Hunt is complying with this Rosicrucian motif, and the image of the scapegoat itself is a symbolic portrayal of Christ's self-sacrifice which is again echoed by the motif of the sun's death at the end of the day, casting its rosy glow on the mountains behind. The full moon hangs low in the sky, and its reflection in the waters of the Dead Sea casts a halo round the skull on the left. This is probably a reference to Golgotha, 'the Place of the Skull'. On the right of the 1858 version, a rainbow arches into the sky, God's traditional symbol of forgiveness, and the Rosicrucian symbol of the immortal soul. The goat itself is an animal which inhabits high places, and as such, is a fitting symbol for the Rosicrucian who has conquered his

¹ I, 22-3. The passage which follows associates 'the revelations of Genesis' with 'The Magi of India', in a manner typically found in later Rosicrucian contexts. Christian touches on the Rose-Cross in I, 144-5.

² *Curious Things*, I, 264.

³ There are two versions of *The Scapegoat*; a superbly detailed large version showing a white goat, 1854, in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, and a smaller 'experimental' version with a black goat and a rainbow, completed in 1858, in the City of Manchester Art Galleries.

⁴ Tate Gallery Cat., p.154. Details of the relationship between the two versions may be found in this catalogue.

lusts and desires, and purified his soul through self-sacrifice.¹ Here, though, it is shown trapped and dying in 'the low place' of the Dead Sea, a reference to Christ's subjection to ritual sacrifice at the hands of an ignorant and base world.

Examples of Rosicrucian Symbolism in the Preraphaelite Circle.

Having detailed some of the recurrent motifs of Rosicrucian symbolism, I now intend to show how these may be identified in some of the paintings of Rossetti's early circle, confining myself to a brief selection of important examples. In some cases, particularly with regard to Hunt, alternative explanations exist, which I fully acknowledge.

However, I argue my case from the symbolism contained within the images, putting forward the suggestion that they may be read in an entirely different way which is consistent with the traditions we have been examining. I do not believe that there exists any conflict in this as it follows an established pattern used by Dante and other mediaeval writers, who place different layers of meaning within an individual work.

Ford Madox Brown.

In 1847-8 Rossetti wrote letters to three poets, Robert Browning, William Bell Scott, and Leigh Hunt, whom he particularly admired. He also wrote to Ford Madox Brown, praising his work and asking if he could become Brown's pupil. In this letter he mentions '*Our Lady of Saturday Night*, and the other glorious works you have

¹ Interestingly, the goat is an attribute of both Lunar Artemis and solar Dionysus, and is usually understood to be a symbol of sexuality and fertility. In Teutonic mythology the goat is associated with 'the May-eve aspect of the Love-and-Death goddess Freya', when it was sacrificed in her honour: *White Goddess*, p.403. This ritual is intimately connected with our present Easter (named after the fertility goddess Ostara, or Oestre), when 'The May-eve goat ... was mated to the goddess, sacrificed and resurrected: that is to say, the Priestess had public connexion with the annual king dressed in goatskins, and either he was then killed and resurrected in the form of his successor, or else a goat was sacrificed in his stead and his reign prolonged. This fertility rite was the basis of the highly intellectualised "Lesser Mysteries" of Eleusis'. Graves adds in a footnote, 'Part of the formula survives in the Masonic initiation ritual': p.404. On p.411, he adds further: 'In the Dionysian Mysteries, the *hirco-cervus*, goat stag, was the symbol of resurrection, of man's hope of immortality, and it seems that when the Hyperborean Druids visited Thessaly they recognised the goat stag, associated with apples, as their own immortal white hart or hind, which also was associated with apples. For the apple tree, *ut dicitur*, is the shelter of the white hind.' Thus this image also has an intimate and important connection with the fertility rituals of the Apple-goddess, and associates Christ with the ancient Mysteries of the sacrificial King.

exhibited', which had 'kept me standing on the same spot for fabulous lengths of time'.¹ It may be that Rossetti recognised in *Our Ladye of Saturday Night*, otherwise known as *Our Ladye of Good Children*, 1847² (Fig. 15), a particular form of symbolism. This unique picture was far ahead of its time, and may be regarded as an important milestone in the history of art. Not only was it a precursor of the style of the later Aesthetic School, but the symbolism it contains was central to, and totally at home within, the iconography of this movement. It was a very unusual painting for its own time, as no-doubt Rossetti recognised.

In this painting, the Virgin is shown washing the infant Christ on the Saturday night of the title. The picture is composed of three vertical spatial divisions, and in the right hand panel, the sun is shown sinking into the sea.³ This is the Saturday night, a reference to the Jewish Sabbath which traditionally ends at sunset. Thus Christ is being ritually cleansed for the bright dawning of his own day, Sun-day, on the morrow. In the Rosicrucian context, this is an allusion to the longed for dawning of the new age of the Sun.⁴ In the central grouping, Mary sits on a throne on which is carved the solar-symbol of the Celtic cross. The cushion on which she sits is decorated with alternating gold and red lozenges on a blue ground, each with a cross at its centre. Behind the Virgin is a hanging of blue fabric decorated with red roses. This colour-combination of red and blue has a Rosicrucian association. Jennings notes, 'There are only two original colours, red and blue, representing "spirit" and "matter"'.⁵ Ruskin writes:

Azure. The colour of the blue sky in the height of it, at noon; - type of the fulfilment of all joy and love in heaven, as the rose-colour, of the fulfilment of all

¹ *Letters*, I, 36, letter 30.

² Tate Gallery Cat. no. 156. Tate Gallery.

³ Teresa Newman and Ray Watkinson, *Ford Madox Brown and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), p. 138, note that sunsets are 'always a favourite emotive device with Brown'.

⁴ This notion was commonplace throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century; it was a belief held by the High Church millenarianists, it is a prominent theme in Swinburne's poetry, - *Songs Before Sunrise*, - and ultimately forms the basis for the title of *The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*.

⁵ *The Rosicrucians*, I, 220. According to Jennings, blue stands for the sea as 'Matter "coagulate"', and the sky as 'Pure elemental matter'. The sea is the 'Material World, or "Great Deep"', or "'matter in the abstract"', or Isis, or Venus, or "Regina Coeli," or "Heva or Eve". 'This colour is assigned to the "Blessed Lady," or "Notre Dame de Paris." In heathen representations of the Ruling Feminine Principle, it stands for the "Virgin of the Sea". ... The colour azure, or blue, mystically signifies the "deep", or the world usurped, or won, out of chaos (Chronos, Saturn, or Time)'.

Red is 'The Producing Power', fire, of 'Baal. Bel. Osiris. Pheobus-Apollo (in manifestation)'. 'In Heraldry, there are only two chief colours: Red (Gules), or the "Princedom" of this world; and Blue (Azure), or the "Queendom" of this world': pp. 222-224.

joy and love in earth. And the stone of this is the Sapphire; and because the loves of Earth and Heaven are in truth one, the ruby and sapphire are indeed the same stone; and they are coloured as if by enchantment, - how, or with what, no chemist has yet shown - the one azure, and the other rose.¹

I dwell on this colour symbolism because it is of some relevance with respect to Rossetti's depiction of the Rose-Cross, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 8.

In Brown's painting, the roses surrounding the head of the Virgin are brightly lit from behind - as if by the sinking sun - forming a halo effect. In the centre of each rose is an equal-armed cross. Above her head is a halo proper, but within it is an unfamiliar device: it is the Hermetic symbol for eternity. Level with Mary's head, in the background of each side panel, is the sea into which the sun is sinking. This represents Mary - 'Mare' - the Mother-sea from which the Sun rises and into which he sinks. In the distance, and hardly detectable, steep rose-topped mountains veiled in cloud just protrude into the sun-disc. On the left, a great cedar of Lebanon, symbol of the Goddess, represents the Tree of Life. Are we to understand that the moon is shining through the Tree? If we look at the eyes of the Christ-child, which form a line in this direction, we will observe that their whites form the motif of two new crescent moons. The angel in the left foreground, in a green dress decorated with golden circles enclosing a trinity of golden dots, - which are echoed on the circlet on her head, - holds a bowl of water to Mary for her to wash the Christ-child. This bowl, representing the sea, echoes the sun-and-sea motif behind. At the same time it foretells the future, when in the Pieta, Christ will return to the Mother in order to be resurrected.

In two other paintings, Brown repeats the motif of mother and child in a most striking way. In both *The Pretty Baa-Lambs*, 1851, and the unfinished *Take Your Son, Sir*, 1851-7, the artist takes a particularly low viewpoint, looking up at the strangely elongated figure of the Mother. This no-doubt is to emphasise that the motif of Mother stands above the artist as an ideal. In both paintings the symbolism is fully naturalised.

¹ *Deucalion: Works of Ruskin*, XXVI, 183-4. This is from a section on heraldic colours and their spiritual meanings; it follows a passage on gules as derived from the Persian for 'rose', and on the 'doubly marked' symbolism of the jar 'shaped like the bud of the rose', which contained the oil with which Mary Magdalene anointed Christ. The section continues with references to the sun and Beatrice.

The first, *The Pretty Baa-Lambs*,¹ depicts Brown's wife Emma with his daughter Catherine in a field of sheep, depicted starkly against a sky of intense blue. In view of the concentrated light under which they stand, there is an ambiguity about the veiled disc in the sky, prompting McCracken, a prospective buyer to enquire, 'if it is the moon which appears or the *sun*'?² In view of the shadows cast by the figures, which indicate a near-noon sun somewhere above them, we can conclude that it is the moon. The fact that it is veiled is therefore symbolically significant. Although the painting depicts a contemporary scene, the low viewpoint and the elongation of the figures are a reference to Gothic stylisation. The mother figure, dressed in blue, set against the azure of the sky, and carrying an infant is an obvious reference to the Virgin. The less obvious reference, that of her paleness against the sky, relates her to the moon in the background. The maid picking flowers behind the mother is a reference to the almost universal symbol of the Lunar-goddess as Spring. The most important motif is that of the large red bow on her dress over the position of her heart, which represents a rose. We are left in no doubt of this because the child holds a dog-rose (or poppy?) in her hand which is superimposed on the bow. It is worth comparing this motif with that in Rossetti's Llandaff Triptych, which is discussed in detail later. Although the lambs in the landscape appear to represent, on one level, an English pastoral idyll, and on another, a Biblical reference to Christ as the Lamb of God, the symbolism may also be read as representing the peaceful and abundant fertility of Mother Earth which spreads out behind the figures.

*Take Your Son, Sir*³ (Fig.16) has often been interpreted as a fallen mother presenting her illegitimate son to its father. I suggest that just the opposite is the case - it is a celebration of parenthood, and sacred parenthood at that. On the mundane level, this is a painting of Brown's wife Emma holding his son Arthur out to his father, who is reflected in the mirror behind. But on a higher level, it depicts the icon of the sacred Mother and Child: the father is an insignificant and tiny figure who is not fit to share the same picture space with them - he is a mere mortal. The mirror behind the head of the Mother represents the lunar orb, and it is shown surrounded by stars on the wallpaper.

¹ Tate Gallery Cat. no. 38. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. 'In spite of the childlikeness of its title it was supposed to contain a hidden meaning'.

² Ibid, p.94.

³ Tate Gallery Cat. no. 82. Tate Gallery.

H Wilson, writing in the *Artist* in 1897, recognised the true Rosicrucian context of this painting:

It is but a simple study of Mrs Madox Brown and the infant Oliver [a mistake], yet the sculptresque perfection of presentment, the imaginative realism of it carries us beyond the real into the essential heart of things, to another sphere, another spiritual plane. It conveys the feeling that one is looking not at a picture, it is hardly complete enough for that, but through a lens of crystalline emotion into the creator's chamber of imagery, where the enthroned mother, her head haloed by the great mother-symbol of the mirror, becomes the type image of life - the ostended child, the token of that miraculous fusion of spirit which is the fount of life. And in the mirror, the mystic type of unity, the mother and the father meet again in worship of the child. All the devotion of the painter and the man went to the fashioning of this unfinished gem.¹

The Rosicrucian content of this image was also recognised and directly exploited by Margaret Macdonald in her adaptation of this painting, entitled *The Heart of the Rose*, 1901 (Fig.17). In her depiction, she has utilised the folds of cloth in which the infant is held in the original, interpreting them as the petals of a rose surrounding the sacred child. To compound the symbolism, it is shown in front of the Virgin (in both paintings) at mid height, thus representing Christ in the womb of the Rose. Although the Rosicrucian Rose is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the Mackintosh circle, it is Brown's paintings which represent the earliest examples of this theme.

To the left of the Mother hangs what appears to be a veil: an image of the mystery of the Goddess unveiled. In short, it is the vision of the revelation of the most sacred and profound religious truth. The painting was first exhibited, unfinished, in 1897, by which time such imagery and its meaning was more widely understood.

In the background of this painting, to the left of the Mother, is a decorative motif - similar to Rossetti's OXOXO motif - which is linked with the motif in another of Brown's paintings, *William Michael Rossetti Painted by Lamplight*, 1856² (Fig.18).

¹ Ibid, p.150.

² Tate Gallery Cat. no. 81. National Trust, Wightwick Manor.

Down the left-hand side of this painting behind William, and only partly included, runs a decorative strip of wallpaper. This is composed of a red motif consisting of a pattern of red diagonal crosses alternating with red lozenges containing eight-spoked circles.

These are by now familiar motifs of the solar wheel. The wallpaper behind William is covered in eight-pointed stars, the traditional emblem for both the sun and Venus. This appears to be a variation of the wallpaper and strip behind the Mother in *Take Your Son, Sir*. I believe that this is not the casual accident it seems, but a convenient way of defining the content of each piece. It is interesting that a very similar motif, a narrow pattern in red, also appears in the background of William Morris's *Queen Guenevere*, 1858. All these might be compared to the strip in the central background of Rossetti's *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, which is composed of similar, though not identical, components.

The sun-circle of the Celtic cross held a special significance for Brown. After his first wife died on 5th June 1846, he designed and erected a Celtic cross for her headstone. Similarly he designed Celtic crosses to mark the graves of both his son Oliver, who died on the 5th November 1874, and Rossetti, at Birchington-on-Sea, erected in the autumn of 1884. This last cross bore symbolic motifs, one of which was the Tree of Life.

I cannot leave Brown without commenting on Rossetti's nickname for him - 'Bruno'. It is my belief that Rossetti affectionately called his earliest mentor and the most faithful of his life-long friends, after the last great Renaissance Hermetic philosopher and proto-Rosicrucian, Giordano Bruno. Similarly, I believe his nick-name for Scott, 'Scotus', to be derived from the Scottish mediaeval philosopher, the 'subtle doctor', John Duns Scotus. Scott always prided himself on being something of a philosopher. After making contact with Scott in November 1847, Rossetti sent him a selection of poems which he described as 'Songs of an Art Catholic'. This led Scott to believe that Rossetti was under the influence of the Oxford Tractarians. I believe that this was Rossetti's guarded way of intimating to Scott that he was a Rosicrucian - 'Art' being his code for the sacred and magical art, and 'Catholic' meaning universal - thus meaning a practitioner of the 'Universal Religion'.¹ Rossetti had presumably recognised signs in Scott's verse

¹ 'That only is "Catholic" which lies in the "Stone" - otherwise *practical magic*': Jennings, *The Rosicrucians*, II, 177 (author's italics). 'Art' is a word commonly used by the alchemists for their 'Royal Art', or the 'Art of the Philosophers'.

allusion to Christ as both the Lamb of God and also the Sun-god Apollo - he forms a trinity as the third *Apol*.

The girl who modelled for the shepherdess was a farm-girl named Emma Watkins, to whom the Brothers gave the curious nickname 'the Coptic'. This strikes one as an unusual title, but it provides a vital clue. The Copts were Christian descendants of the ancient native Egyptian peoples. From them stemmed the Monophysite, or Jacobite heresy, which declared that Christ had only one nature, and that was divine. This recalls the words of Waite quoted earlier; 'those who belong to the Order look upon Jesus as the long-expected Messiah - though not apparently as God manifested in flesh'. We have already noted the combination of ancient Egyptian and Christian beliefs in the Hermeticism of Ficino and the Florentine Neoplatonic Academy, and this channelled through Bruno (who placed an even greater emphasis on Egyptian lore), provided the basis of Rosicrucianism. In this picture, the mythology and the magical Hermetic texts of the ancient Egyptians may be understood as wedded to Christianity.

The image can be effectively divided through the central figure of the shepherdess. On the left are the shepherd and the sheep, and on the right are the trees, stream, and corn. This may be read as two different mythologies which combine in the two figures. The left represents the mythology of the nomadic herdsman with their solar deity, who takes the form of the shepherd. This ultimately refers to Israel, culminating in the solar Jesus - note his ruddy complexion as the rosy-cheeked Sun-god. On the right we see a field of corn, which denotes the mythology of a fixed agricultural culture, centred around the mysteries of the Goddess Ceres, or rather her Egyptian counterpart Isis. She is the lunar Corn-goddess, and he is the solar Corn-king, the Sun-god Christ who must die for the people. He holds out the death's-head moth to her as if to question her upon the nature of death, but she responds scornfully - as if to imply that his spiritual nature is immortal. The apple that the lamb has bitten has conferred upon him the gift of resurrection and eternal life. They represent a trinity; he will die, but the sacred lamb will take his place. It is the myth of the sacred family Isis, Osiris, and Horus. The sheep pass from the pastures, through the stream of the Water of Life, - which reminds us of

Dante's experience in the Earthly Paradise - and mingle in the corn. This represents the fusion of two mythologies to provide a universal religion.¹

The Afterglow in Egypt, 1854-63² (Fig.20) celebrates the figure of Isis as Corn-goddess. I believe that the title refers not only to the evening harvest-fullness of the image itself, but also to the spiritual afterglow still emanating from Egypt - that is, the Hermetic Tradition. The pose of the figure is a traditional one taken from the sculptures of the ancient temples, and she is shown as dark as the earth itself, reminiscent of the Bride in the Song of Solomon. In 1882, Ernest Chesneau noted the symbolism, and associated the figure with the myth of Demeter. Hunt agreed that the figure of the girl had 'a singular resemblance to the old sculpturesque type', but stated that 'there is no kind or degree of mysticism in it'.³ In fact, there is no need for mysticism; the painting stands as a representative icon in its own right. Despite this denial, the overall symbolism of the picture adds to our understanding of its message: the evening light after the sunset, the sheaf of corn with the poppy in it, the mown harvest field in the background, the doves which surround the figure of the Goddess, the watercourse behind her, and her black funerary garb all denote her function and the context - the death of the solar Corn-king. This painting may be read as a pagan Pieta, in which the Lunar-goddess carries away the body of her slain son. We may also note the range of rose-colored hills in the far distance, which we now recognise as a Rosicrucian motif.

The Light of the World, 1851-3⁴ (Fig.21), is perhaps Hunt's most puzzling and enigmatic creation. What is most extraordinary is that Hunt here portrays Christ as lunar. He is not shown in daylight, the usual role of a Sun-god who is literally 'the light of the world',⁵ but at night, with the moon providing his halo, and in an orchard, the

¹ I am aware of the symbolic reading that Hunt provides for this painting - see Tate Gallery Cat., pp.95-6. While this is the universally accepted view, I here point out an alternative reading derived from the symbolism of the painting itself. It could be suggested that the different readings may be provided for separate audiences; those who recognise the symbolism, and those who do not. The consistency of this trait throughout the group cannot be ignored. 'Hunt explained his reluctance "to force the moral" of the painting' as he gave it to JE Phythian, in 1897: *ibid*.

² Tate Gallery Cat. no. 87. Southampton Art Gallery.

³ *Ibid*, p.163.

⁴ Tate Gallery Cat. no. 57. Keble College, Oxford.

⁵ Wigston writes: 'Christ was the Light of the world - the Divine Lux, after more of which every true Mason is searching. But the Sun is the Light of the world - it dies in winter apparently, to be reborn in the summer': *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, p.95. Hunt painted the scene from life between 7th November and 6th December, 1851.

realm of the Lunar Apple-Goddess. One might compare this painting with Rossetti's later *Vision of Fiammetta*.

Hunt wrote that he 'felt very determined to make the figure mystic in aspect',¹ and in order to do this he painted 'by a lantern from some contorted apple tree trunks, washed with the phosphor light of a perfect moon - the shadows of the branches stained upon the sward'.² We see Christ in an apple-grove at night haloed by the moon. He is dressed in the Lunar and Rosicrucian colours of red and white. Directly above his head is the evening star, Venus. His figure is slight and androgynous. He has copper coloured hair, which with Rossetti is usually a sign that the figure is intended to be read as Venus. His face, lighted from below, was painted from Christina Rossetti, and his hair from Lizzie Siddal.³ The light comes not from the Saviour, but from his lamp, a favourite Rosicrucian symbol, and here, with its spirals and stars, a model of the universe.⁴ The breast-plates holding his cloak symbolise the union of Jewish and pagan traditions.⁵ All in all there exists a most puzzling ambiguity about this whole painting. He is intended to be both day - the 'Light' of the title- and night, he is intended to be Sun and Moon, male and female, pagan and Jewish. In a Platonic sense, he reunites the 'severed selves' of male and female. In short, he is the sum of all things.⁶ He is shown knocking on a closed door, and I believe this may be a reference to the tomb of Christian Rosencreutz in *Fama*. This tomb - a symbolic device for his body - was the

¹ Tate Gallery Cat., p.119. In *Pre-Raphaelitism*, I, 350, Hunt writes: 'I may say that any occult meaning in the details of my design was not based on ecclesiastical or archaic symbolism, but derived from obvious reflectiveness. My types were of natural figures such as language had originally employed to express transcendental ideas, and that they were used by me with no confidence that they would interest any other mind than my own.' We shall probably never be clear what Hunt's true position on religion was: what is clear from his writings is that his beliefs were entirely personal and individualistic. He was a free-thinker in all such matters, often taking a position at odds with established orthodoxy.

² Ibid, p.117.

³ I note here that Watts-Dunton, a known Rosicrucian, stated that 'The Christian idea is essentially feminine' (*Old Familiar Faces*, p.200), and that *Aylwin* contains the motif of a female saviour figure. Isis is entitled the 'Saviour' in *The Golden Ass*. Hunt's painting may thus conflate the male / female aspects of the deity Love.

⁴ In a letter to WB Scott, Hunt describes Christ in solar terms: 'The figure of Christ standing at the door haunted me ... waiting in the night - ever the night - near the dawn, with a light sheltered from the chance of extinction, in a lantern necessarily therefore': quoted in Anne Clark Amor, *William Holman Hunt: The True Pre-Raphaelite* (London: Constable, 1989), p.233.

⁵ Tate Gallery Cat., p.119. In the same letter to Scott quoted above, Hunt describes Christ 'with [a] body robed like a priest, not of Christian time only'.

⁶ Wigston writes, p.101, that it is the marriage of these dualities, light and dark, male and female, summer and winter, that 'constitute Creation, and whose offspring is the reappearance of the Light or Logos - Revelation - the child or son, in which we see the mystery of the Trinity prefigured'.

‘compendium of the universe’, upon which was inscribed *Jesus mihi omnia*, ‘Jesus all things to me’.¹ This, I believe, is Hunt’s message - Christ is the union of all opposites and the sum of all things, in which all things may be found in an all encompassing unity.

Before leaving Hunt, I wish to cast a quick glance at his last major work, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1886-1905.² This complex painting contains a central image that is directly concerned with our theme. The unfortunate Lady, who as she weaves, is no other than Fate or Fortuna, with the lunar mirror of Nature behind her, stands within the magic-circle of the universe, whose destiny it is she determines. Above her head, in a great arch representing the heavens, are painted the astrological signs which govern the fates of mankind. We may compare this image with that in the opening lines of Rossetti’s Sonnet 77, *Soul’s Beauty*: ‘Under the arch of Life, where love and death, / Terror and mystery, guard her shrine’. On each side of the great central mirror, of which the Lady is the anima, are two images which complete the trinity. On the left-hand side is the Virgin and Child, and on the right is an image of Hercules as Sun-god taking an apple from the Tree of the Garden of the Hesperides. From above the Tree stream the rays of a glory. Behind the Tree is a symbol of the sun and moon combined. Hercules was another of the solar prototypes of Jesus who also died on the Tree. It is perhaps significant that in this last major painting of his life, Hunt turns not to an orthodox Christian theme, but to a symbolic image of universal import.

John Everett Millais.

In many ways, Millais strikes us as the most balanced, if not ordinary, of the three founding Brothers, a man seemingly at ease with himself and not prone to passionate convictions. However, his *Ophelia*, discussed in the section on the *Willow-wood* sonnets, shows that his use of symbolism was every bit as concentrated, if not so obvious, as that of his colleagues. In *Autumn Leaves*, 1855-6³ (Fig.22), such symbolism may be detected.

This was painted from his garden at Annat Lodge, Perth, where the Millais’ were staying after their marriage in 1855. Millais was casting around for subjects, and had

¹ Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.246.

² Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut.

³ Tate Gallery Cat. no. 74. City of Manchester Art Galleries.

intended to paint Effie 'in the middle of the Apple tree'.¹ After abandoning several attempts at various themes, he lit upon this. Millais describes his intentions to FG Stephens:

I have always felt insulted when people have regarded the picture as a simple little domestic episode, chosen for effect, and colour, as I intended the picture to awaken by its solemnity the deepest religious reflection. I chose the subject of burning leaves as most calculated to produce this feeling, and the picture was thought of, and begun with that object *solely* in view ... I cannot say that I was disappointed that the public did not interpret my meaning in the 'Autumn Leaves' as I scarcely expected so much, and I was not sanguine of my friends either, as I know I am not the sort of man who is accused of very deep Religious Sentiment, or reflection. However as you certainly have read my thoughts in the matter I do not hesitate to acknowledge so much.²

Effie Millais describes how her husband worked on the painting:

seizing the moment immediately after sundown, he painted [the] horizon behind Perth, the distant Peak of the Ben Vorlich, the Golden sky, the town lost in mist and the tall Poplar trees just losing their leaves. Later he softened it and brought the background into better colour, still magnificently bright. In the lower part of the back ground he put our lawn and the Apple trees at the foot of the garden, in the front four figures aurified with a Bonfire of Autumn leaves from which smoke issued.³

Although we cannot be precisely sure of Millais' intentions - he had considered adding a quotation from the Psalms to the catalogue of its first exhibition, but decided that this would be 'an affectation and obscure'⁴ - we may read this painting as addressing the theme of the death of the solar year. The scene is set 'immediately after sundown', after

¹ Tate Gal., p.141.

² Ibid, p.139.

³ Ibid, p.141.

⁴ Ibid, p.139.

the death of the sun.¹ The pyramid of the peak of Ben Vorlich on the horizon seems to indicate the place of its setting, and this triangular shape is echoed directly below in the shape of the bonfire, which is not blazing in glory, but rather smouldering as if it had likewise gone out, thus repeating the theme. It is also composed of the dead leaves which signify the demise of vegetation. We should note the heart-shaped leaf on the bonfire. The four poplar trees which unite the glowing sky with the darkness below likewise correspond to the four figures of the girls below. We are reminded of the sisters of the Sun-god Phaeton who weeping for his death were turned into poplars.² Of the four female figures, three are clearly distinguished from the fourth behind; they form a trinity of mourning dressed in dark funerary attire, and may be seen as representing the three lunar queens who ritually attend the death of the solar king. The fourth, who is altogether lighter in tone, who is ruddy checked and copper haired, alone looks serene and contented. Like the shepherdess in *The Hireling Shepherd*, she seems to realise that this is no real death; her downcast eyes look towards the smallest girl who holds the apple of immortality in her hands. The diagonals of the red scarf of this girl seem to be a reference to the diagonal red ribbons of Christian Rosencreutz.

The Scottish location and image of the bonfire suggests a possible reference to a Celtic fire-festival, and indeed, the end of the Celtic year is celebrated with the festival of Samhain, 31st October to 2nd November.³ It seems that the symbolism of this picture relates to the ritual death of the year-end. The apple in the hands of the smallest girl suggests that the Sun-god Apollo has fallen into darkness.

¹ In the left background, below the horizon, is just visible the spire of St John's Kirk, Perth. Bond, in *Dedications and Patron Saints of English Churches*, p.42, writes: 'the commemoration of his [St John's] nativity on 24th June connected him with one of the very greatest festivals of the Pre-Christian world'. The decapitation of the Baptist symbolically connects him with the fertility rituals and the sacrificial death of the Solar-king. St John is the forerunner of Christ in that he passes the role of sacrificial King to him as tanist. This is presumably why he is traditionally depicted as, or with, a lamb carrying the flag of the Cross. The city insignia of Perth, the old name of which was Saint Johnstoun, is the lamb carrying a flag upon which is the Scottish saltire. There is a type of apple known as 'Apple John', or 'Pomme de Saint Jean', because it is reputed to ripen on St John's day. Is the apple the girl is holding such a reference?

² Graves notes, *White Goddess*, p.193, 'the tree of the autumn equinox and of old age, is the shifting-leaved white poplar... According to Pausanias it was first introduced into Greece from Epirus by Hercules... The side of the leaves next to his brow were whitened by the radiant heat he gave out. [That is, as a Sun-god.] ...the black poplar ... was a funeral tree sacred to Mother Earth in pre-Hellenic Greece.'

³ We still celebrate this festival on the 5th November, under a different guise.

Another painting which shares a similar set of symbolic meanings is *The Vale of Rest*, 1858,¹ which was also painted at Perth. Here, the setting sun is equated with the Christian cross on the bell tower, directly below which is the grave being dug by the nun - the dying solar orb is descending into Mother Earth to be reborn. Both the colouring and the symbolism are reminiscent of Caspar David Freidrich.

Closely related to both these paintings is *Spring*, also known as *Apple Blossoms*² (Fig.23), also painted in Perth during the years 1856-9. The trigger-words 'Spring' and 'Apple' alert us to the fact that sacred symbolism is present here, as does also the motif of the Orchard. The original conception links this painting closely with Rossetti's Oxford Union design, as Effie Millais records: 'The first idea was to be a study of an apple tree in full blossom, and the picture was begun with a lady sitting under the tree, whilst a knight in the background looked from the shade at her'³ It seems by now hardly necessary to point out this recurrent motif, and the importance it holds within Preraphaelite art. Later, this idea was altered to a larger scheme, and in 1857 Millais began the present design. The painting is a hymn to Spring, and the beauty and promise of youth that it holds, which is symbolised by the apple blossoms with their pledge of fruit to come. The apple blossoms and the girls are synonymous; the eight maidens are a set of nineteenth century nymphs in the classical style, virgins who haunt the apple-groves of Diana. In contrast to the youth and vitality of the girls, the orchard-grove behind seems ancient, still, and timeless. The girls, we are to understand, are only as transient as the blossoms on the trees, as the scythe on the right, representing time and reaping, tells us. The cut flowers in the baskets testify to this. This is Nature's way, season on season. This is but a brief interlude before the storms of life strip the blossoms from the trees. But in a wider sense, this painting represents all pastorals, idylls, and Golden Ages.

The girls are shown supping from bowls. In their centre - they form a compressed circle around it- stands a large bowl on a white circular cloth. Next to it is a golden scallop-shaped ladle. These symbols indicate a lunar circle, a liquid-filled vessel, and Aphrodite's shell. The bowl may contain water, but I suggest that it is more likely to be milk to indicate the fertility and fullness of the Goddess suckling her young - compare

¹ Tate Gallery Cat. no. 100. Tate Gallery.

² Tate Gallery Cat. no. 96. The Right Hon. The Viscount Leverhulme.

³ Ibid, p.171.

the symbol of the Pelican. The life-giving liquid is being transferred from the larger vessel to the smaller vessels the girls hold and drink from, and they themselves, in their turn, are likewise vessels. The three girls on the right are dressed in broadly lunar colours, and the black cloak of the girl second from right is decorated with Tree of Life motifs.

John Orchard.

John Orchard presents us with something of a problem. He submitted a dialogue and a poem which were published in the fourth and last issue of *The Germ*, to which Rossetti wrote an introduction stating that it had been received a week before the author died. The dialogue, entitled *The House of Kalon*, is perhaps the strangest of all the contributions published in *The Germ*, and the tone reminds us, more than anything, of the original Rosicrucian manifestos. The poem is entitled *On a Whit-Sunday Morn in the Month of May*, and starts, 'The sun looked over the highest hills, / And down in the vales looked he', and then tells of Lord Thomas, 'a true fast knight', who rises early,

He to catch the breeze through the apple trees,
By the orchard path did stray,
Till he was aware of a lady there
Came walking adown that way:
Out gushed the song the trees among
Then soared and sank away,
On a Whit-sunday morn in the month of May. (St.2)

The girl is poor and of a lower caste than he, but 'a queenly shape had she', and he endows her with all he has.¹

William, in his introduction to the 1901 facsimile reprint of *The Germ*, notes that 'Orchard was a painter of whom perhaps no memory remains at the present day',² and

¹ The motif of idealised love which ignores the disparity between social classes was a recurrent Preraphaelite concern, as shown in such works as Rossetti's *Llandaff Triptych* and Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*. This was reflected in practically all of their own personal relationships.

adds the disclaimer that 'it will be understood that Orchard was quite unconnected with the PRB. He expressed opinions of his own which may indeed have assimilated in some points to theirs ... Christian [a character in the Dialogue] forces ideas of purism and puritanism to an extreme, beyond anything which I can recollect as characterizing any of the PRB.'¹

The Dialogue itself is remarkable, and deserves quoting from at length. I shall here provide only some brief examples, including a passage from the start of the dialogue:

Kalon. Welcome, my friends: - this day above all others; to-day is the first day of spring. May it be the herald of a bountiful year, -not alone in harvests of seeds. Great impulses are moving through man; swift as the steam-shot shuttle, weaving some mighty pattern, goes the new birth of mind. As yet, hidden from eyes is the design: whether it be poetry, or painting, or music, or architecture, or whether it be a divine harmony of all ...²

We are told the 'Genius is like a tree', but that the old tree must first die in order to make way for new life.³ The language is at times close to that of alchemy, and the relationship of the soul to art is discussed: 'He should deem his art a sacred treasure, intrusted to him for the common good; and over it he should build, of the most precious materials, in the simplest, chastest, and truest proportions, a temple fit for universal worship.'⁴ 'The multitude must be brought to stand face to face with the pious and earnest builders, to enjoy the severely simple, beautiful, aspiring, and solemn temple, in all its first purity, the same as they bequeathed it to them as their posterity.'⁵ Despite William's caution in distancing the Brotherhood from the views of the enigmatic and deceased author, the fact that it was included in the organ of the group suggests that there was at least some degree of compatibility of ideals.

² P.25. So much is this the case that one wonders if he was not one of the Brotherhood writing under a *nom de plume*.

¹ P.26.

² Ibid, p.147. This type of dialogue is a favoured method and notable characteristic of such philosophers as Plato and Bruno.

³ Ibid, pp.147-8.

⁴ Ibid, p.150.

⁵ Ibid, p.157.

Burne-Jones and William Morris.

Burne-Jones and William Morris represent an entirely different approach to my symbolic theme than did those artists of the original Brotherhood. For the sake of historical accuracy, I confine the term 'Preraphaelite' to the original seven of the Brotherhood. The Preraphaelites were not concerned with the depiction of Beauty, but for Burne-Jones, Morris, and Rossetti, this was their one and only true creed. They were the first artists to develop a Cult of Beauty, and as such, they were not Preraphaelites but the first Aesthetes.¹ For them, Ruskin's dictum of Truth to Nature was replaced by the creed of Truth to Beauty, and this must be understood in an entirely Platonic context amounting to a religion. Like Plato, it utilised mythology as its vehicle of expression; to the pagan myths were added the spiritualised ideals and the Christian mythologies of the Middle Ages, most prominently those centred around King Arthur and the Grail legends. Pictorial stress was laid, not on capturing Nature with all accuracy, but capturing the emotional and spiritual concept with all accuracy. Where the Preraphaelites had stood back from emotion - with the exception of Millais' tendency towards the sentimental - the Aesthetes used emotional response as a powerful catalyst to achieve their aims. This emotional response, which was intended to bring the viewer into direct confrontation with a higher truth, was achieved through the concentrated depiction of Beauty, not of the image alone, but also of the idea contained in the image. Thus a certain important element of both intellectual and emotional sympathy was required to fully appreciate the Aesthetic image.² The intended response required a direct and intense association between the sensibility of the viewer and the ideas implanted in the image. Where the original Preraphaelites had located their symbol-systems within the direct depiction of observable Nature, the Aesthetes located theirs under the guise of classical, romantic, and mythological themes which abandoned observable reality in favour of a conceptual ideal. Although a sophisticated recognition and understanding of the keys to the

¹ Ford Madox Hueffer, *Rossetti*, pp.41-2, writes that Morris and Burne-Jones are 'the latter-day "Pre-Raphaelites" - a false name that should be always written the "Aesthetes"'. He adds: 'Morris was the heart and soul of the Aesthetic Movement'. He further quotes William: 'Rossetti was now in the position of what the French term a *chef d'Ecole*'. Walter Pater, 'Aesthetic Poetry', in *Appreciations*, pp.213-227 (p.215), defines Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* as 'the first typical specimen of aesthetic poetry'. The same, I suggest, applies to his artworks.

² Morris stated: 'As things go, it is impossible for any one who is not highly educated to understand the higher kind of pictures': Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, II, 22. He was referring, wrote Mackail, to 'the work of the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting as it culminated in the art of Burn-Jones'.

symbol-system was still necessary, it was now on more open display, rather than hidden in the matrix of nature.

This is a major departure that separates and defines the Aesthetes, working in all mediums, from their predecessors. The basis of the Cult of Beauty was largely derived from Ruskin, who propagated the belief that human beings, however oppressed and deprived they might be, could assert their self-dignity and humanity through a direct recognition and response to Beauty. It is the appreciation of Beauty that separates man from beasts.¹ Morris strove to put this idea into practice, both in his belief that man's everyday surroundings should be as beautiful as possible,² - hence his involvement in the Arts and Crafts Movement, - and also politically through his ideals of social reform. At the root of all that Ruskin and the Aesthetes stood for was the belief that mankind is defined and refined through Beauty.

The vast volume of work produced by both Burne-Jones and Morris is too large for me to do more than to select a few examples.³

My first is *Queen Guenevere*, 1858,⁴ which was the only oil painting completed by Morris, when he was firmly under the influence of Rossetti. Morris was at that time working on his first volume of poetry entitled *The Defence of Guenevere*. This picture is also known as *La Belle Iseult*, another theme close to Morris's heart, and the subject of his Oxford Union mural of 1857. The early date at which this picture was painted is significant. The picture is of Jane Burden in a mediaeval context, and displays Morris's fastidious depiction of such an environment. The white curtains in the background bear a motif in red which shows a diagonal red-cross pattern interspersed with red dots. The Queen is dressed in the Rosicrucian colours of white and red, and her dress is patterned with a pattern of diagonal red crosses. Between the red crosses is a motif, also in red, which is rather hard to make out - it appears to be a stylised tree with rays around its

¹ The same idea is to be found in Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur*.

² Mackail records that for Morris, 'then and always, the word architecture bore an immense, and one might almost say a transcendental, meaning. Connected at a thousand points with all the other specific arts which ministered to it out of a thousand sources, it was itself the tangible expression of all the order, the comeliness, the sweetness, nay, even the mystery and the law, which sustain man's world and make human life what it is. To him the House Beautiful represented the visible form of life itself.' *Life of William Morris*, I, 78. The italics are mine.

³ It would not be far from the truth to state that the whole of the output of these two artists illustrates my theme.

⁴ See *William Morris*, ed. by Linda Parry (London: Philip Wilson / Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), p.89 and Cat. no. G.10. This is the catalogue for the William Morris Centenary Exhibition at the V&A. Further references will be to 'V&A Cat.'. Tate Gallery.

crown.¹ Directly behind her hangs a tapestry on which is depicted the Tree of Life on a blue background. The Queen may be intended to be understood as the manifestation, or anima, of the Tree. The Tree is shown bearing a full complement of golden fruit. The use of a diagonal pattern in conjunction with the Tree of Life also appears in the background of Rossetti's *St George and Princess Sabra*, 1862.

Morris strove to give his version of the mediaeval ideal architectural form in the Red House, designed by his close associate and friend Philip Webb in 1859. Red House, described as 'more a poem than a house' by Rossetti,² was built in the middle of an orchard, carefully sited to cause the minimum of damage to the trees. In summer, the fruit could be picked from the upstairs windows. I think that it was deliberately sited within an orchard for symbolic reasons, perhaps to lend an ambience of benign fruitfulness to Morris's creative pursuits. Similarly, I believe the name Red House to have symbolic connotations, perhaps inspired by Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe*. It has always been formally understood to have simply taken its name from the materials of its construction, red brick, but this material may have been chosen because of the symbolic significance of its 'redness'. The white of the apple-blossom, combined with the red of the house provide the Rosicrucian colours. The house was designed to embody the very essence of the mediaeval ideal, and this seems to have been woven into its very fabric. The most alchemical of all Rossetti's symbolic paintings, *Dantis Amor*, was painted directly onto the doors of a cabinet in the house in June 1859. The trinity of paintings of which this forms a part are discussed in greater detail later; suffice it to say here that the theme of Dante's reinstatement to Paradise, - 'Hortus Eden', as the scroll proclaims, - seems to be a motif that corresponds to the ideal of the house as a whole.

I next turn to the Green Dining Room, the first major non-ecclesiastical work undertaken by the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. to the commission of the South Kensington Museum in 1866, and opened to the public in 1868³ (Fig.24). Every aspect of this room has a symbolic significance. The 'Green' of the title is a reference to Nature. Up to waist height, the room is lined with dark green panelling, above which,

¹ Although I have reached the conclusion that this motif is intended to represent the Tree of Life, albeit stylised, one is still left with the lingering impression that it also - perhaps more so - resembles a pine-cone. Is it possibly the Rosicrucian 'mystic Fir-Cone, a mystery enfolded within and without by many meanings' alluded to by Waite? Arthur Edward Waite, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal: Its Legends and Symbolism* (London: Rebus, 1909), p.560.

² Ian Bradley, *William Morris and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p.27.

³ V&A Cat. p.141.

forming a decorative frieze around the room, are painted panels designed by Burne-Jones depicting the deities governing the twelve houses of the astrological year; the sun and the moon flank the door through which one enters. These are interspersed with brilliant golden panels on which are depicted the fruit and foliage of various fruit-bearing trees. Thus this frieze is concerned with the turning year and fruitfulness. Above this frieze, the walls are decorated with a design olive branches on a pastel green background. Running round the top of the room is a decorative geometric frieze consisting of red crosses, the centre of each of which contains a rectangle featuring alternating motifs of trees and dogs chasing hares. Between each of these is a golden sun motif.¹ The ceiling is decorated with great discs of a solar motif, each of which contains an unmistakable Rose-Cross. These are picked out in red against a pale background, and consist of a foliate equal armed cross contained in a rayed sun-disc, with a rose in the centre. Between the arms of each cross there is a star-shaped bloom, also in red.² There could be no better symbolic depiction of the Rose-Cross. The ceiling is covered with nine of these impressive motifs.³

These motifs are not completely without precedent. Shelley, in *Prometheus Unbound*, III.4.104, employs several of the symbolic motifs we have already encountered in Rossetti's poetry:

My vision then grew clear, and I could see
 Into the mysteries of the universe:
 Dizzy as with delight I floated down,
 Winnowing the lightsome air with languid plumes,
 My courses sought their birthplace in the sun,

¹ V&A Cat. no. I.6.

² V&A Cat. no. I.7.

³ There is an intriguing similarity between these motifs and those that often feature on the reverse side of Celtic crosses in the west of Scotland. An eight rayed sun-disc executed in foliate decoration is a familiar motif in these crosses. See Graham Ritchie and Mary Harman, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Argyll and the Western Isles* (Edinburgh: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1985), pp. 94, 98, and 114. The Islay crosses, pp. 109 and 113, and the Iona crosses display the solar-disc incorporating rose-like motifs. While these are patently not Rosicrucian crosses, the symbolism of sun-disc in conjunction with vegetable foliates represents an almost perfect parallel. It is quite possible that Morris may have been aware of these decorations (the symbolism of the Celtic cross was certainly utilised by Brown, not least in Rossetti's own grave monument), and his design for a wallpaper, *Ceiling, 101* (Cat. no. L.14), bears a close similarity to both the Green Dining Room ceiling designs and to Celtic sun-foliates. Compare, for example *Ceiling, 101* with the cross foliate on the Campbeltown Cross, Ritchie and Harman, p.98.

Where they henceforth will live exempt from toil,
Pasturing flowers of vegetable fire.¹

Swinburne uses the same image of a flower of vegetable fire in *Laus Veneris*:

Fair still, but fair for no man saving me,
As when she came out of the naked sea
 Making the foam as fire whereon she trod,
And as the inner flower of fire was she. (St.98)

Two sides of the room contain panels of stained glass. One of these contains four allegorical figures with plain circular lights above and below. The other is made up of similar circular lights, each of which contains a decorative motif, all of which feature the symbol of the sun: the sun and the Tree of Life, the sun over the sea, the sun and a flower, the sun and a dove, and the sun and a rabbit. All the land-based designs show the sun over a hill. The whole room is a hymn to fertility and the rhythmic cycles of Nature, and is composed of many of the motifs we have been studying.

Another important example containing these themes is *The Orchard* tapestry, otherwise known as *The Seasons*² (Fig.25). This is composed of four female figures behind whom are shown five types of fruit tree. We should note the vertical axis of the central trunk, around which the image is centred. The third figure is particularly significant, as she is shown wearing the red saltire of the Rose-Cross. The fourth figure wears a white version. The suggestion of seasonal change in the title combined with the motif of an orchard of fruit bearing trees and the Rosicrucian cross provide a powerful summary of the ideology. We must also note the numerological significance of the quaternity of women allied to the quintessence of trees, which culminates in a nine.

Other late tapestry works which return to youthful preoccupations include *Pomona*,³ *The Adoration*, which shows the Virgin surrounded by roses and lilies,⁴ the *Holy Grail*

¹ *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), p.271.

² V&A Cat. no. M.123.

³ V&A Cat. no. M.126.

⁴ V&A Cat. no. M.129.

series, and in particular *The Attainment*, which shows the Red-Cross Knight's vision of the chalice,¹ and *The Pilgrim at the Heart of the Rose*, from the *Roman de la Rose*.² These late works are important because they are the products of Morris and Burne-Jones working in conjunction, and also because they illustrate that the same themes retain the same level of importance at the end of the careers of both artists as they did at the start.

WB Yeats, who in his younger days knew Morris well, alludes to his Rosicrucian vision:

his mind was illuminated from within and lifted into prophecy in the full right sense of the word, and he saw the natural things he was alone gifted to see in their perfect form; and having that faith which is alone worth having, for it includes all others.³

The early Christians were of the kin of the Wilderness and of the Dry Tree, and they saw an unearthly Paradise, but he was of the kin of the Well and of the Green Tree and he saw an Earthly Paradise.⁴

He knew clearly what he was doing towards the end, for he lived at a time when poets and artists have begun again to carry the burdens that priests and theologians took from them angrily some few hundred years ago. His art was not more essentially religious than Rossetti's art, but it was different, for Rossetti, drunken with natural beauty, saw the supernatural beauty, the impossible beauty, in his frenzy ... He [Morris] may not have been, indeed he was not, among the very greatest of the poets, but he was among the greatest of those who prepare the last reconciliation when the Cross shall blossom with roses.⁵

¹ V&A Cat. no. M.130.

² V&A Cat. no. M.15 (embroidered version).

³ 'The Happiest of the Poets', in *Essays and Introductions*, p.62.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.63.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.64.

Watts-Dunton.

Although Watts-Dunton did not enter Rossetti's life until about mid 1874, I include him here because of his relevance to this theme. In 1898, sixteen years after Rossetti's death, Watts-Dunton published his novel *Aylwin*.¹ There is no opportunity to discuss this work in detail here, and it will have to suffice to say that Watts-Dunton employs a symbol-system which inherits a close affinity from Rossetti's.² The book, Watts-Dunton tells us, 'is at once a love-story and an expression of a creed'.³ The creed behind this novel is Rosicrucianism. The final image of the novel is that of the Rose-Cross:

The sun was now on the point of sinking, and his radiance, falling on the cloud-pageantry of the zenith, fired the flakes and vapoury films floating and trailing above, turning them at first into a ruby-coloured mass, and then into an ocean of rosy fire. A horizontal bar of cloud which, until the radiance of the sunset fell upon it, had been dull and dark and grey, as though a long slip from the slate quarries had been laid across the west, became for a moment a deep lavender colour, and then purple, and then red-gold. But what Winnie was pointing at was a dazzling shaft of quivering fire where the sun had now sunk behind the horizon. Shooting up from the cliffs where the sun had disappeared, this shaft intersected the bar of clouds and seemed to make an irregular cross of deep rose.⁴

Rossetti himself appears in the novel characterised as D' Arcy, who describes how he came to be a mystic, and to 'accept a spiritualistic theory of the universe', following the

¹ Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Aylwin* (London: Henry Frowde / Oxford University Press, 1906).

² For example: the novel opens with a passage describing the sea as a metaphor for the soul; the conjuring of the image of the beloved from a pool, similar to *Willow-wood*, pp.179 and 191; the 'cloud shaped as a man's hand' from *Transfigured Life*, appears at various strategic moments throughout the book (e.g. pp.124, 159, and 253); the inclusion of a painting by Chiaro dell' Erma, the artist of Rossetti's *Hand and Soul*, p.425; the Pelican motif, p.215; and the mystical importance of music, as in *The Monochord*, p.358.

³ Preface, p.xi.

⁴ Pp.485-6. This image is also mentioned on p.159.

death of his wife.¹ Elsewhere he comments: 'I am at this moment describing a beryl in some verses', an allusion to Rossetti's 'Beryl Song' in *Rose Mary*.²

The primary importance of Watts-Dunton is that he is the only link that I have come across with a definite Rosicrucian connection. In *Old Familiar Faces*, he makes the following enigmatic statement about Rossetti:

Imagination, indeed, was at once his blessing and his bane. To see too vividly - to love too intensely - to suffer and enjoy too acutely - is the doom, no doubt, of all those 'lost wanderers from Arden' who, according to the Rosicrucian story, sing the world's songs; and to Rossetti this applies more, perhaps, than to most poets.³

It is possible that 'Arden' means 'Eden'. William Sharp notes: 'A year or two previously Rossetti had executed another design founded on a composition by Mr Watts, a romantic little Rosicrucian story.'⁴ This he identifies as the drawing *Forced Music*.⁵ There is nothing in the drawing to denote a Rosicrucian context. Rossetti executed another drawing, *The Spirit of the Rainbow*,⁶ from a sonnet by Watts-Dunton entitled *The Wood-Haunter's Dream*, which he gave to his friend. The sonnet describes the Spirit as 'a rain-drenched girl / Whose eyes of azure and limbs of rose and pearl / Coloured the rain above her golden head', but, standing by her side, the poet 'saw no more the holy Rainbow's stains', but only the dripping landscape. This seems to encapsulate a Rosicrucian riddle, the symbols of which we are by now familiar with. The wood is *hyle*, the material world, the rain is that which fertilises it, and through which the sun passes to produce the rainbow. The rain, in that it is water, is thus feminine. The rainbow, which is immaterial, is that 'by whom the glowing heavens are dyed', and is the anima of the immortal soul. This is a Rosicrucian symbol, standing for the promise of life beyond death, as in Rossetti's *Fiammetta*: 'A presage and a promise stands; as 'twere / On Death's dark storm the rainbow of the Soul'. In alchemy, an

¹ Pp. 239-40.

² P.238.

³ P.70.

⁴ *DGR*, p.255.

⁵ Surtees Cat. no. 247, plate 370.

⁶ Surtees Cat. no. 245, plate 369. The sonnet which it illustrates is reproduced in Sharp, *DGR*, pp.254-5.

important stage of the process is characterised by iridescent hues known as ‘the Peacock’s Tail’, which are depicted symbolically by the peacock, the rainbow, or the mythological goddess, Iris.¹ Iris is literally ‘the spirit of the rainbow’, and was the messenger of the goddess Hera (Juno), the Queen of Heaven. Thus, like Beatrice, she is the feminine link between earth and heaven.

¹ See Fig.13, in which all three are shown in conjunction.

ROSSETTI AND THE ROSE-CROSS.

PART 2: ROSSETTI'S OCCULT VERSE.

In the last section I quoted Theodore Watts-Dunton's statement that Christina and Dante Gabriel had inherited their penchant for symbolism from their father's obsessive interest in Dante and the occult. This is borne out by Rossetti's sonnet dedicated to the memory of his father, *Dantis Tenebrae*:

And did'st thou know indeed, when at the font
Together with thy name thou gav'st me his,
That also on thy son must Beatrice
Decline her eyes according to her wont,
Accepting me to be of those that haunt
The vale of magical dark mysteries
Where to the hills her poet's foot-track lies
And wisdom's living fountain to his chaunt
Trembles in music? This is that steep land
Where he that holds his journey stands at gaze
Tow'rd sunset, when the clouds like a new height
Seem piled to climb. These things I understand:
For here, where day still soothes my lifted face,
On thy bowed head, my father, fell the night.

This sonnet gives the impression of a significant personal statement. Beatrice, declining her eyes, looks down on the young poet, 'Accepting me to be of those that haunt / The vale of magical dark mysteries'. That this does refer to occultism is suggested by the title of the sonnet (*The Shadow of Dante*), with its implication of truth hidden in darkness. It is also important to note that Rossetti ascribes this to his father.

Here it is necessary to refer back to Gabriele Rossetti's *Veggente in Solitudine* (*The Seer in Solitude*), which is the poetic autobiography of his life. In this he relates how, as

he was sailing away from Italy for the last time, he had a vision, first of a giant winged warrior, and later, heralded by strange lights in the sky, the figure of Dante himself appeared, speaking:

Thou sufferest - hear and hope. A stern decree
Now bids thy feet traverse the vale of pain.
Myself have proved how salt another's bread,
Myself have known how hard a path it is
Going and coming by another's stair.

Dante then compares the miserable state of exile that has to be endured by the two refugees, but offers Gabriele a recompense for his sorrows:

And to reward thee for thy fortitude,
The secret ordering of my holy hymns
Profound and difficult I will reveal.
Once purged away the darkness of the world,
Thou wilt be able in my covert words
To hear the voice of Truth ineffable,
Truth hidden from the most, revealed to few.¹

Whereupon, he wraps himself again in cloud and disappears. Although this was written towards the end of Gabriele's life, both the title of his autobiography and this visionary experience quite firmly establish the context within which the poet wishes to place his life's work.

Soon after settling in London, Gabriele set about the interpretation of Dante's work, and it is worth establishing his method. The three books which most fully explicate his theories are *Lo Spirito Antipapale che produsse la Riforma*, (*The Anti-Papal Spirit which produced the Reformation*), 1832; *Il Mistero dell' Amor Platonico del Medio Evo*, (*The Mysterious Platonic Love of the Middle Ages*), 1840; and *La Beatrice di*

¹ Waller, *The Rossetti Family*, pp.76-7. It is not possible to go into Gabriele's life and work in any detail here. Both Waller, and Vincent's *Gabriele Rossetti in England*, are reliable and informative sources.

Dante, 1842.¹ His method was ‘the direct application of Masonic interpretations to Dante’.² William writes that *Amor Platonico* was ‘a book of daring and elaborately ingenious speculation, enforcing the analogy of many illustrious writers, as forming a secret society of anti-Catholic thought, with the doctrines of Gnosticism and Freemasonry’.³ He believed that the *Vita Nuova* detailed a Masonic ritual, and that ‘The central canzone of the *Vita Nuova* is the keystone of the mystic masonry’.⁴ The heavens of the *Divine Comedy* refer to the ‘various degrees of the occult science’.⁵ He maintained that all Dante’s mystic symbolism is derived from occult science, and that the mystic journey of the *Divine Comedy* consists of an initiation rite:

he informs us that a symbolic journey undertaken by the neophyte is a feature of both ancient and modern mysteries. The aspirant was first led underground where he was brought to the edge of a dark well; in the underworld he found various rivers; the judges of the place then showed him sinners suffering torments, monsters in the midst of flames, and other horrible sights. Throughout, the neophyte was led by a special guide or master. Such journeys usually took place at the spring equinox. After this period of trial the aspirant was brought before a great door watched by an armed guard who bade him enter and not look back. The guard carried two keys. In the Egyptian mysteries the aspirant then underwent a ritual purification through fire, water, and air which prepared him to receive revelation of the mysteries of Isis. In modern Masonry initiation leads to the seven degrees of occult science.

¹ Other works are as follows: *Dante, Comedia - Inferno*, 1826; *Iddio e l’Uomo, Salterio*, (*God and Man, a Psalter*), 1833 (this and the *Anti-Papal Spirit* were prohibited in Italy by the Vatican); *Il Veggente in Solitudine*, (*The Seer in Solitude*), 1846; *Versi*, 1847; *L’Arpa Evangelica*, (*The Evangelic Harp*), 1852.

² Vincent, p.86. In *Amor Platonico*, Gabriele ‘sets out to prove the continuity of secret mysteries from Pagan days, with a centre at Eleusis and having kinship with the religions of Egypt and the Far East, through such sectarian movements as the Manichean to modern Freemasonry’: *ibid.* Vincent further states, p.99, that these studies were ‘later to develop into a system on a close study of Freemasonry. It is therefore important to follow his Masonic studies’.

³ *Letters and Memoir*, I, 15. He adds: ‘This book was printed and prepared for publication, but was withheld (partly at the instance of Mr Frere) as likely to be accounted rash and subversive’. It was stored in the Rossetti’s attic until after Gabriele’s death, when all the remaining copies were burnt at the insistence of his widow Frances, who considered the work to be blasphemous.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.90: ‘Both deaths [Beatrice and her father] refer to Dante himself, who in being born to a “new life” must first undergo a mystic dissolution as in masonic ritual’.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Rossetti points out in great detail the parallelism between such rites and the *Divine Comedy*, where Virgil plays the part of the guide and Beatrice corresponds to Isis.¹

In short:

The source of all Dante's mystic symbolism is the *scienza occulta* which had been secretly practised in Europe from time immemorial.²

This science had its foundations, according to Gabriele, in the Egyptian Mysteries and those of Eleusis, the Pythagorean and Druidical Mysteries, the Manicheans, Zoroastrians, Gnostics, Albigensians, Paulicans and Swedenborg - in short he made a comprehensive study of all the ancient and modern mysteries and heresies. The Troubadours, Guinizelli, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Ficino, and Lorenzo de' Medici were all sectarians. Christianity itself is based firmly on this tradition of the *Arcanum Magnum*. Waite records that Gabriele's writings 'exercised an influence on certain schools of occult thought in England'.³ Gabriele Rossetti was himself a Freemason, and had been initiated into the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in 1809. Carbonarism, with which he was also intimately involved, derived its rituals from Freemasonry.⁴ Both were outlawed by the Papal authorities to whom Gabriele was so opposed.

It is of course impossible to reduce such prolific writings - the *Amor Platonico* alone runs to some seventeen hundred pages in five volumes - to these few lines of description, but it does illustrate that the content of Gabriele's obsession as contained in his writings is precisely that sort of arcana that we later find in the work of Dante Gabriel. William denies that his father significantly influenced the children:

I question whether my brother had ever read twenty consecutive lines of Dante until he was some fifteen or sixteen years of age; no doubt after that he rapidly

¹ Ibid, p.91.

² Ibid, p.94.

³ AE Waite, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*, p.530.

⁴ It is perhaps worth noting that the *gergo* used by the Carbonari was based on much the same method that Gabriele employed in his interpretations of Dante, and this may well have provided the model for his theories. Thus it is not hard to understand why he saw Dante in the role of patriot with which he could so readily identify.

made up for lost time. Our father, when writing about the *Comedia* or the *Vita Nuova*, was seen surrounded by ponderous folios in italic type, '*libri mistici*' and the like (often about alchemy, freemasonry, Brahminism, Swedenborg, the Cabbala, etc.), and filling page after page of prose, in impeccable handwriting.¹

William relates how these studies had the effect of stifling the Rossetti children's interest in Dante until they were older and came to the poet out of their own interest. But in the Preface to *The Early Italian Poets*, Rossetti takes a different view;

The first associations I have are connected with my father's devoted studies, which, from his own point of view, have done so much towards the general investigation of Dante's writings. Thus, in those early days, all around me partook of the influence of the great Florentine; till, from viewing it as a natural element, I also, growing older, was drawn within the circle.²

The phrase 'I also ... was drawn within the circle' may be significant. It recalls Rossetti's curious letter to William Bell Scott of 1853, written shortly after his visit to Scott in Newcastle, and his return via Warwick and Stratford-upon-Avon, the journey upon which he had written *The Hill Summit*:

one feels again within the accursed circle. The skulls & bones rattle, the goblins keep mumbling, & the owls beat their obscene wings again, round the casting of those bullets among which is the devils seventh, though it should lie hidden till the last. Meanwhile, to step out of the ring is death and damnation.³

Sonnet 70, *The Hill Summit*, was composed at virtually the same time as Rossetti's letter to Scott:

This feast-day of the sun, his altar there
In the broad west has blazed for vesper-song;

¹ *Letters and Memoir*, I, 64.

² *Works*, II, Preface, xv.

³ Dobbs, *DGR*, p.91. Also in Scott's *Autobiographical Notes*, I, 293.

And I have loitered in the vale too long
And gaze now a belated worshipper.
Yet may I not forget that I was 'ware,
So journeying, of his face at intervals
Transfigured where the fringed horizon falls, -
A fiery bush with coruscating hair.

And now that I have climbed and won this height,
I must tread downward through the sloping shade
And travel the bewildered tracks till night.
Yet for this hour I still may here be stayed
And see the gold air and the silver fade
And the last bird fly into the last light.¹

This sonnet is full of the symbols with which we have now become so familiar. The poet has lingered in the vale of darkness - or rather, *veil* of darkness - too long, and is now a 'belated worshipper' at the altar of the sun - the Hill Summit - on Sunday evening. The 'feast-day of the sun' may refer simply to Sunday, but it is also possible that the reference may be to one of the fire-festivals which were traditionally held on hilltops; again, Mid-summer's Day, St John's Day, is a possible candidate. The poet has 'climbed and won this height' and stays to see the conjunction of gold and silver fade - an obvious reference to a union at this point of solar and lunar influences. Into the glory of this 'last light' flies 'the last bird', an image of the soul. Here the poet rests to absorb these influences before he has once again to descend 'And travel the bewildered tracks till night', or the confusion of the material darkness below.

This same symbolism is found in *Dantis Tenebrae*:

¹ It is of interest to compare the imagery of this sonnet with *Sunset Wings*:

To-night this sunset spreads two golden wings
Cleaving the western sky;
Winged too with wind it is, and winnowings
Of birds; as if the day's last hour in rings
Of strenuous flight must die. (St. I)

And also *Possession*:

There is a cloud above the sunset hill,
That wends and makes no stay,
For its goal lies beyond the fiery west ...

This is that steep land
Where he that holds his journey stands at gaze
Tow'rd sunset

In this poem, the poet ends the sonnet with his face lifted upwards, while his father is pictured with his head bowed in darkness, as though Rossetti had succeeded in his spiritual quest where his father had failed.

We have noted this symbol of the rose-tinged 'high place' in the last chapter. *The Hill Summit* and *Dantis Tenebrae* use this symbol as a metaphor which equates with the human desire for Olympus, Mount Sinai, and the Earthly Paradise, where man is closest to the Sun and thus to God. The shadowed valley is the 'Vale of Darkness', both in terms of Biblical death, and of Platonic materialism which entraps the soul of man. Ficino uses mountain analogies in the myths of Prometheus and Sysyphus to make a similar point:

We aim at the highest summit of Olympus and dwell in the abyss of the lowest vale ... here we are detained by a host of obstacles and impediments, there deflected by the blandishments of the meadows.¹

The most important image of *The Hill Summit* is the sun's face 'Transfigured', 'A fiery bush with coruscating hair'. 'Transfigured', as we shall see presently, is a word replete with Rosicrucian meanings and associations. The sun's face 'with coruscating hair' is an image taken directly from the work of the seventeenth century Rosicrucian philosopher, Robert Fludd, who wrote in *Mosaicall Philosophy*,:

the Macrocosmicall Sun's dignity and perfection is easily to be discerned, in that this Royal *Phoebus* doth sit in his chariot, even in the center or middle of the heavens, *glittering with his golden hair*, as the sole visible Emperour, holding

¹ Gombrich, 'Botticelli's Mythologies' in *Symbolic Images*, p.71.

the royall Scepter and government of the world, in whom all the vertue of the
celestiall bodies do consist...¹

It is significant that Rossetti composed this sonnet while making a pilgrimage to
Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare's Sonnet 7 contains many of the symbols we have
noted:

Lo, in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
Serving with looks his sacred majesty;
And having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill,
Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
Attending on his golden pilgrimage;
But when from highest pitch, with weary car
Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day,
The eyes, 'fore duteous, now converted are
from his low tract, and look another way:
So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,
Unlook'd on diest, unless thou get a son.²

Similar imagery is found in William Drummond's *Summons to Love*:

Make an eternal Spring! (7)
Give life to this dark world which lieth dead;
Spread forth thy golden hair.³

¹ Debus, *Chemical Philosophy*, I, 230. The italics are mine with the exception of 'Phoebus'. This image might be compared with that of the charioteer in 'Retro Me Sathana!'.
² William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* (London: Dent / Everyman, 1993), p.6.
³ Francis T Palgrave, *The Golden Treasury* (London: Macmillan, 1933), p.3. 'Night like a drunkard
reels / Beyond the hills, to shun his flaming wheels' (line 39).

The image of the sun's rays forming the coruscating golden hair of Phoebus's head recurs in Rossetti's work, although it is sometimes applied to the hair of a female; the most obvious example being *Lady Lilith*, in which Lilith represents both sun and moon. In Sonnet 78, *Body's Beauty*, which is the sonnet written for this painting, we are told that 'her enchanted hair was the first gold'. This reference is to the sun, the light of which, both mythologically, Biblically, philosophically, and alchemically was 'the first gold'. In stanza 6 of *Eden Bower*, Lilith speaks the lines 'All the threads of my hair are golden, / And there in a net his heart is holden'.¹ It is possible that the fragment 'A golden robe, yet will she wear / Only a rose in her golden hair' has Rosicrucian associations.² In the above context golden hair denotes the sun.³

It is a feature of the Grail mythologies that the hero assumes solar characteristics. Dunbar writes:

The names of Grail heroes are frequently traceable, with a high degree of probability, to Celtic hero-names with such significations as 'Shining One, Son of the Permanent,' 'Gray Hero' (storm god), 'Fire,' 'Golden Hair, Lord of Light,' and so forth. The hero as the sun, loves flower ladies and moon ladies, ladies who must be rescued from imprisonment. Gawain, Peredur, Lancelot du Lac, Galeschin, and Galahad each rehearse some part of the sun drama. Galahad, indeed, reigns in the spiritual city just one year, the term of the sun god, and then is swallowed up in eternity.⁴

Gawain, for instance, is clearly depicted as a solar warrior, whose strength waxes till noon, and wanes after. Although his name is generally interpreted as meaning 'Hawk of

¹ Both Rossetti's *Jenny* and Browning's *Golden Hair* share the motif of money (i.e. material gold) being placed or found in golden hair. Rossetti's painting of Lilith was based on his translation of lines in Goethe's *Faust*, a tale of alchemy and magic which had a deep influence on both him and his work.

² *Works*, I, 373. An alternative version runs:

With golden mantle, rings, and necklace fair,
It likes her best to wear
Only a rose within her golden hair.

³ By correspondence the golden hair of the sun transfers downwards (in Hermetic magic all heavenly influences operate only downwards) to the 'first gold' of the fields of wheat which adorn the head of the Earth-goddess at midsummer.

⁴ *Symbolism in Mediaeval Thought*, p.433. 'The hero, triune as sun god, storm god, and vegetation god, moves through romance after romance, revealed only by such hints as golden hair, miraculous birth, unquenchable heat of body, the marvellous weapon, or the revolving castle from which he rises at dawn.'

May', a reference to solar flight as in Horus, Emma Jung and Mary-Louise von Franz, in their detailed analysis *The Grail Legend*, offer the possibility that the name means 'He with the Beautiful Hair', suggesting a solar reference.¹ In the same work, the name of Perceval is given as meaning 'Pierce the Vale'.² As a higher form of Gawain, whom he more or less supersedes as a symbolic entity, Perceval is a type for Christ - at least until he in turn is largely superseded by Galahad.³ Thus this 'Pierce the Vale' would encompass imagery of both the harrowing of the dark regions of Hell, and also the dispelling of darkness in the lower regions of the material world as the symbolic Sun-god ascends in the sky, with all the various connotations this involves. In another sense, one could understand it as meaning the piercing of the *veil* of the mysteries.

These motifs of the solar hero with the beautiful glittering hair who pieces the vale of darkness are precisely those we have noted in Rossetti's verse. Many aspects of Rossetti's verse involve the notion of both a quest and an upward struggle. In Sonnet 67, *The Landmark*, 'the path is missed', and the poet, who has committed an unspecified spiritual offence symbolised by the disturbance of the sacred waters, 'must go back' in order to find the right path.⁴ With no light left, the poet finds himself in the vale of darkness. It is a significant motif of the Grail Quest that the hero fails to recognise the relevance of what he has seen, and must as a consequence undergo further trials to return to, and obtain, the rightful goal. This sonnet is followed by *A Dark Day*, which

¹ Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend* (Boston: Sigo Press; London: Coventure, 1986), p.213, fn.2.

² P.185. 'The literal translation, "pierces (or penetrates) the valley," seems the likeliest and would imply that the hero was destined to penetrate the dark valley of the unconscious.'

³ The reason that more importance was given to Perceval in the European romances was to stress his humanity and its struggles for perfection against supreme odds, as opposed to the impersonal and distant supremacy of Galahad who was created in a state of near perfection. Galahad and Lancelot seem to be two halves of one figure that have become separated in the tales except for the blood-tie, whereas the double figure of Gawain-Perceval retain their symbolic connections as a dual entity operating on different levels. Perhaps both these pairs of figures represent the surrogate for the Year-king and the tanist who supersedes him while leaving out the aspect of the ritual murder involved.

⁴ The imagery here is interesting; by throwing pebbles into the water, the poet has disturbed both his own image and the image of heaven reflected in the pool. In psychological and symbolic terms, what seems initially to be an act of minor importance holds cosmic significance as the ripples spread and the water turns black. What was clear and still - the reflected image of the heavenly Godhead - is now agitated and despoiled, and this is mirrored within the poet himself; the unity of both the universe and his own self-image have been shattered. The psychology is very similar to that of the Grail quest, where often the searching knight commits a sin without being aware of its nature or the extent of its consequences. Jennings, in *The Rosicrucians*, I, 278-9, writes; 'nothing is permitted to be thrown into water (for fear of profaning it). Here we have the rites of Aphrodite or Venus, or the Watery Deity'. This is the basis of the custom of throwing a silver coin into water for luck: it appeases the lunar / water goddess when crossing rivers and streams. It also supplies the correspondence water / silver / moon.

repeats the themes of storm (agitation) and darkness. This is the point in 'the vale of magical dark mysteries / Where to the hills her poet's foot track lies'. In *The Hill Summit*, the poet has 'won this height' and risen 'a belated worshipper' to briefly stand in the last light of the sinking sun. The reprieve is only temporary. Besides the Rosicrucian connotations, we may also compare this motif of the journey through the vale of darkness and the steep climb into the light with Dante's progress through hell and his ascension of Mount Purgatory. Rossetti's poems *On the 'Vita Nuova' of Dante* and *Dantis Tenebrae* both stress the magical significance of Beatrice. In Sonnet 72, *The Choice*, III, the octave poses a most curious question:

Thou say'st: 'Man's measured path is all gone o'er:
Up all his years, steeply, with strain and sigh,
Man clomb until he touched the truth; and I,
Even I, am he whom it was destined for.'
How should this be? Art thou then so much more
Than they who sowed, that thou shouldst reap thereby?

Here again the motif is repeated, and we should note the words 'and I, even I, am he', which paraphrase Beatrice's words to Dante when he first meets her again in the Earthly Paradise, 'Look on me well: I am, I am Beatrice'.¹ Rossetti is representing himself as heir to an ancient truth: the words refer to his baptismal name Dante, thus connecting this sonnet with both *Dantis Tenebrae* ('when at the font / Together with thy name thou gav'st me his'), and the mystery of revelation in the Earthly Paradise, when Beatrice's veil is dropped. It seems that the significance of Beatrice as the vehicle of some arcane truth has been revealed to him. It is perhaps at this moment that he dons the mantle of his father's knowledge:

¹ *Purg.* XXX.73. The passage of Dante's reunion with Beatrice contains familiar images: she appears with the sun, 'I have seen ere now at the beginning dawn / The region of the East all coloured rose' (line 22), and at first Dante does not recognise her for she is dressed as Nature, and veiled. He relates how Love 'had pierced me through, as with a spear' (line 42). Before addressing Dante, 'the veil she had from her head let fall' (line 67), and she is described as standing in her 'queenlihood'. Besides obviously displaying the motifs of a sacred mystery, we are also aware that these repeat the symbols of the Grail. Beatrice's words almost seem to be an answer to the inscription on the base of Minerva's statue at Sais: 'I am everything that was, that is, that is to be. Nor has mortal ever been able to discover what I am'.

These things I understand:
For here, where day still soothes my lifted face,
On thy bowed head, my father, fell the night.

Sonnet 79, *The Monochord*.

William wrote of *The Monochord*,

Of all the sonnets in the *House of Life*, this is the one which seems to me most obscure. In fact, I do not think that its meaning can be seized by a reader unfurnished with some information which the sonnet itself does not supply. ...I was considerably baffled by them until, consulting Mr Theodore Watts, I was apprised that the idea of the sonnet had come to my brother on an occasion when he was listening to music. Hence the adoption for the title of the musical term Monochord, which is defined as 'an instrument of one string, used to ascertain and demonstrate the several lengths of the string required to produce the several notes of the musical scale.' Evidently, however, the word Monochord is not here applied in this literal sense, but may rather indicate 'the power of music in eliciting and meting out the emotions of the human soul.' Even after one knows the primary subject-matter of the sonnet, it remains (to me at least) a very difficult one in its particular images and form of expression. Its theme might perhaps be briefly expressed thus - 'The mutual response of music and of the human soul.' In the opening lines the poet seems to intimate that the grand strains of the music conjure before his mental eye a vision of sky and sea. Or, taking a larger view of the whole subject, we might say that the point of the sonnet is the common essence of all these outward and inward matters; as if one thread (monochord) ran through all - vibrated through all. With these rather dubious preliminaries I proceed.¹

¹ *Designer and Writer*, pp.240-1. It is significant that it was Watts-Dunton who told William this. Reading between the lines, we may perhaps speculate that Watts-Dunton, whom we know to have

Rossetti himself wrote of *The Monochord* that it expressed ‘That sublimated mood of the soul in which a separate essence of itself seems as it were to oversoar and survey it’.¹ We should note here the use of the words ‘sublimated’ and ‘essence’, both of which are alchemical terms.

There is a significant difference in the opening line between the original version as published in the 1870 volume of *Poems*, where it was not included in *The House of Life*, and the 1881 version of *The House of Life*, where it figured as Sonnet 79. In the original version, the first line of the octave reads ‘Is it the moved air or the moving sound’; this was later altered to ‘Is it this sky’s vast vault or ocean’s sound’. The original line questions whether it is the ‘moved air’ -perhaps in the sense of a musical ‘air’ - or the ‘moving sound’ of the music, that draws out his soul and holds it ‘quailing on the bound’ of spiritual and emotional experience. The later version transcends the particular moment and translates it into a more universal symbol of the natural universe, which moves his soul to the same extreme. In doing so, it employs the familiar Rossettian motifs of sea and sky.

In the second half of the octave this threshold of experience is defined as being the boundary between Life and Death; the soul standing poised between these polarities, as it were, questioning the meaning of its own existence. The word ‘breath’, here ‘quailing on the bitter bound’, signifies the soul. Meanwhile the thunderous roar of the music, continuing the metaphor of the sea of sound which has brought him to this pinnacle of emotional and spiritual crisis, is defined as the ‘tide of all emergency’. The last two lines of the octave compound the metaphor of the sea to mean not only the flood of music, but also the sea of emotion within himself, and the sea of spiritual experience which lies beyond him. We may at this point refer back to the sestet of *The Choice*, III:

Nay, come hither. From this wave-washed mound
Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me;

Rosicrucian sympathies, explained the intimate connections between music and mystical philosophy to William - if he was not aware of these already.

¹ Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.692. Doughty writes: ‘I understand the general purport of the sonnet to be this: There is an unspeakably mysterious bond between the universe and the soul of man (macrocosm and microcosm): the phenomena of nature search the inmost recesses of the soul, inspiring awe, administering solace’.

Then reach on with thy thought till it be drown'd.
Miles and miles distant though the last line be,
And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond, -
Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea.

It is the 'separate wave' of the poet's soul which 'labour[s] in the ground' of his material being as it instinctively reaches out to the invisible which is its true spiritual home. It is the spiritual quest of the soul towards the unknown and the unknowable.

The motif of the 'separate wave' is an important one. The artist, as an individual, is at once part of the greater whole, yet necessarily struggles to attain distinction and fame. In a sense the ego refuses to be drowned in the greater swell, which is symbolised at this particular moment, by the swell of the music. In most, if not all, artists, the ego refuses to be overwhelmed by the creations of others, and is constantly involved in the serious struggle towards individuation. At the same time, both the sea and the music represent turmoil and motion - that is passion and emotion - which is the opposite of tranquillity and peace (e.g. the pool in *The Landmark*). In the last sonnet of the sequence, *The One Hope*, this is expressed in the line, 'Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet',¹ which directly relates to the 'labour' of the 'separate wave' 'in the ground' in *The Monochord*.

The 'ground' may be seen as the fixed impediment of materiality which impedes the fluid progress of the soul as it attempts to return to the source. Again, the 'ground' may perhaps be interpreted in the painterly sense as the blank 'ground' of the canvas, upon which the act of (self) creation, the Grand Design of man's purpose, has to be fulfilled. The creative act, the 'labour' of self-birth, is then that which hovers between Life and Death. The waters, as the element of emotion, intuition, and imagination, are, then, the waters of this creative act of self-birth. The poet-painter is literally creating, or re-creating, himself in an act of spiritual and emotional regeneration. The symbol of the 'moving air' is used by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel as a depiction of God, who in the form of wind (mythologically the fertilising aspect of the Sky-god), moves over the

¹ The idea of the stream, or hidden water, is reminiscent of the alchemical 'Hermetic Stream'. This is often depicted in alchemical illustrations, and is the symbol of sophic mercury: it represents the elixir of life, the 'water of the wise', or the 'spirit of the metals'. Lunar Diana, who also represents sophic mercury, is sometimes shown bathing in, or in connection with, this stream. Bearing in mind the specifically Rosicrucian nature of 'the Monochord', this interpretation would seem appropriate.

face of the waters (the element of feminine creativity), at the moment of the Creation. If this represents a moment of birth, as I believe, the capitalisations within the phrase 'is it Life or Death' return us to the theme of the spiritual paradox of Life in Death, and Death in Life - the 'labour in the ground' of materiality towards the New Life of the soul in God.

The theme is continued in a different sense in the sestet. Here it is transformed into a motif of Deliverance. Once again we are presented with the metaphor of the difficult road, - 'The lifted shifted steeps and all the way'. This reminds us of Dante's climb up Mount Purgatory.¹ Here it is extended by imagery drawn from Exodus 14, of the pillar of fire and cloud which leads the Israelites out of exile and bondage towards the Promised Land; 'and it was a cloud and darkness to them [the Egyptians], but it gave light by night to these [the Israelites]' (v.20). During this Deliverance Moses parts the waters 'and made the sea dry land (v.21) ...the Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud (v.24) ...the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea' (v.29). It is 'the tide of all emergency', and one should note the element of 'emergence': in the midst of the sea, the poet is recognised as a 'separate wave'. The metaphors of delivery and birth are inescapable; the waters part to form the passage which allows the chosen people to be (eventually) reborn into the Eden of the Promised Land. It forms a direct parallel with Rossetti's sonnet.

The same metaphor is used in Sonnet 5, *Heart's Hope*:

Shall I the difficult deeps of Love explore,
Till parted waves of Song yield up the shore
Even as that sea which Israel crossed dryshod?

The sonnet continues the metaphor of the 'lifted shifted steeps' which lead to a confrontation with the 'flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame' in 'this wind-warm space', thus expanding the Biblical parallel to Exodus 19, in which Moses faces

¹ Bruno uses the same imagery in *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 101: 'In those steep paths where cruel beasts may be, / Let not heaven leave ye!'. Also, p.118:

Destiny, when shall I that mountain mount,
Which, blissful to the high gates bringing, bring,
Where those rare beauties I shall counting, count.

God on Mount Sinai. 'And the Lord said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud' (v.9); that is, as a veiled mystery:

there were thunders ['thus thunder-crown'd'] and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud (v.16)... And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace (v.18)... And ... the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder (v.19)...

The sound of the musical instrument in conjunction with the thunder here draws the parallel closer. It is this implied meeting with God that produces the 'regenerate rapture' that allows the poet not to turn away from 'the devious coverts of dismay',¹ but to face and acknowledge them in a moment of psychological healing. It is an acceptance of his own 'shadow' - the cause of his secret and devious despair - that brings about an assimilation of the psychic Self. It is a moment of the reconciliation of opposites which gives birth to the complete Anthropos. It is a baptism of fire which washes away the stains of the past, and also predicts the Baptist's words in the New Testament: 'he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire'.²

This fusion of the divided self may be understood to operate on two levels. On the spiritual level, the trauma suffered by man in his separation from the Godhead in the Fall, both Platonically and Biblically, has been healed, and the New Adam stands on the threshold of a restoration to Eden. On the mundane personal level, the poet is able now to confront the darkness of separation and personal guilt he has suffered through the death of Lizzie Siddal, and, at the same time all the 'devious coverts of dismay' he has suffered through his guilt and emotional separation from Jane as described in Sonnet 40, *Severed Selves*. All these dark aspects have been simultaneously healed by the 'regenerate rapture' of Love, as experienced through his new love for Jane.

¹ These 'coverts of dismay' are related to *Inferno*, Canto I: 'I had strayed into a dark forest, / And the right path appeared not anywhere'. But Bruno asserts that 'one goes rambling amongst the wild woods of natural things, where there are many objects under shadow and mantle, for it is in a thick, dense, and deserted solitude that Truth most often has its secret cavernous retreat, all entwined with thorns and covered with bosky, rough and umbrageous plants; it is hidden, for the most part, for the most excellent and worthy reasons, buried and veiled with utmost diligence, just as we hide with the greatest care the greatest treasures, so that, sought by a great variety of hunters, of whom some are more able and expert, some less, it cannot be discovered without great labour': *Heroic Enthusiasts*, II, 63.

² Matthew 3:11.

The process of this reintegration with God has been an alchemical progression undertaken within the alembic of the poet's heart. *The Monochord* details this process of psychic rebirth through an alchemical series of symbols; the octave starts with images of sky and sea, or the elements of *air* and *water* - 'breath' is itself the 'moved air', and as a soul-symbol, is moved by sound ('moving sound' here may also be interpreted as the depth of the sea, or the emotional deeps). The poet's 'separate wave' labours through the 'ground', the element of *earth*, which symbolises his material body. To this is brought, in the sestet, the element *fire*, through which the poet is refined and assayed. Thus a kind of alchemical code exists within the structure of the sonnet itself.¹

Through this expression of the macrocosm operating through the microcosm - that is the man, or the poet himself - in the form of the four elements, or by the qualities of the four elements, the poet is led to a recognition of the Quintessence (God, or Love), both within himself, and running through all nature. This is the Monochord.

The Biblical references form a vital part of this symbolic process. Moses, to the Cabalists and the Renaissance Neoplatonists, was the arch-magus of the Old Testament, the prophet specifically selected to receive the Word directly from the sacred fire of the Godhead, and to be the vehicle of his message on earth.² To the Neoplatonists, Hermes Trismegistus and Moses were the two Fathers of their magical tradition:³ the Hermetic Arts and the Cabala were welded together by Pico della Mirandola to form a unified system of sacred magic, hence his astonishing assertion (in view of the inquisition) that 'there is no science which gives us more assurance of Christ's divinity than magic and the Cabala'.⁴ Edgar Wind writes:

In praising the wisdom of such religious disguises, Pico claimed that the pagan tradition had a virtue in common with the Bible. That there were Hebrew

¹ Bruno, op. cit., I, 122-3, symbolises the Enthusiast as 'a little earth' from whose 'twin lights' (the eyes), stream tears to the sea; he sighs to the air; 'and the lightnings from his heart ['my zeal'], not like a little spark or a weak flame, which cooling itself in the air, smokes, and transmigrates into other beings' - thus base man ('a little earth') acquires the higher elements ('the air, the sea, the fire') in his quest towards the divine. These constitute a series of steps upward.

² William Blake memorably depicted this scene in *God Writing on the Tables of the Covenant*, which shows Him surrounded by the furnace of his sacred fire.

³ Ficino, in *Theologia Platonica*, provides a theological genealogy of Zoroaster, Mercurius Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato. Moses was held to be contemporary with Hermes, who was known as 'the Egyptian Moses'.

⁴ Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.112.

mysteries as well as pagan, the Bible suggested by recording that on two occasions Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai for the purpose of receiving the tablets of the Law. Since it would be absurd to suppose that God needed in each of these instances forty days to hand Moses two tablets inscribed with ten commandments and accompanied by a series of liturgical rules, it was evident that God had conversed with Moses on further matters, and had told him innumerable divine secrets which were not to be written down. These were transmitted among the rabbis by an oral tradition known as Cabbala (in which the theory of the *sephiroth* and the 'absconded God' resembled the Neoplatonic 'emanations' and the 'One beyond Being'). In relation to the written law of the Old Testament, the Cabbala was thought by Pico to hold the same position as Orphic secrets held in relation to pagan myths. The Biblical text was the crust, the Cabbala the marrow. The Law was given to the many, but its spiritual understanding to only a few.¹

He adds, 'As Donne observed, disguise is one of the great forces of revelation: "For as well the Pillar of *Cloud*, as that of *Fire*, did the Office of directing"'.²

One of the principal aims of Pico's Hermetic Cabalism was to use the underlying harmonies running through all levels of universal nature, 'so the Magus marries earth to heaven, that is to say the forces of inferior things to the gifts and properties of supernal things',³ in order that the Magus, through the exercise of his intellect may reclaim what

¹ *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, p.25. Jennings, in *The Rosicrucians*, II, 140, writes: 'The Cabalists and Talmudists aver that Scripture, history, fable, and Nature, are alike obscure and unintelligible without their interpretation. They aver that the Bible is the story of heavenly things put forward in a way that can be alone comprehensible by man, and that without their Cabala, and the parables in which they have chosen to invest its revelation, not religion only, but even familiar Nature, - the Nature of Things and of Men - is unintelligible'.

² *Pagan Mysteries*, p.25. Bruno, op. cit., II, 12-14, employs the symbol of the Phoenix, 'which burns in the sun, and the smoke from which almost obscures the brightness of that by which it is set on fire':

And so my soul, illuminated and inflamed
By radiance divine, would fain display
The brightness of her own effulgent thought;
The lofty concept of her song sends forth.
In words which do but hide the glorious light,
While I dissolve and melt and am destroyed.

The Enthusiast is inflamed and 'illuminated', but is obliged 'rather to conceal it than to render it light for light, sending forth that smoke the effect of the flame, in which the substance of himself is resolved'.

³ Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, p.90, quoting Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, etc. Note again that this operation was reflected in the work of Blake.

once had been his divine nature. This rested upon the control, exercise, and operation of divine creative powers, both within and without of himself. We can see a reflection of this in Rossetti's sonnet. The Rosicrucians were the inheritors of Pico's systems of belief, and for them also the works of Moses held the key to the Great Work. Jennings writes:

The 'Grand Magisterium' - the 'Great Work', as the Alchemists call it - is mythed by Moses in Genesis, in the Deliverance from Egypt, in the Passage of the Red Sea, in the Jewish Ceremonial Law, in the Lives of the Patriarchs and Prophets... In this manner the true Cabalists are supposed to be Alchemists in common with the Magi, the Sages, Philosophers, and Priests, when these possessed the 'true and only knowledge'.¹

He adds, 'Moses, when he describes the Creation of the World, is the Alchemist, relating in parable the generation of the solids'.²

This nineteenth century view, and the basis of ideas upon which *The Monochord* rests, is to be found in the works of the seventeenth century English Rosicrucian, Robert Fludd. 'The Macrocosmic Monochord' is the title of an illustration in Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica atque Technica Historia*, published by JT de Bry in Oppenheim in 1617 (Fig.26). Fludd also wrote a treatise entitled *Monochordum Mundi Symphonicum*, which was included in his *Anatomiae Amphitheatrum* of 1623.³

¹ *The Rosicrucians*, II, 137.

² Ibid, p.181. He continues, p.182: 'Moses' description of Creation is to be taken as the process of alchemy, as worked by Nature itself, being her Form'. He further states, p.264: 'We discover that, not only is the 'Garden of Eden' an allegory in itself, but the whole structure of the Bible is an allegory, beginning with Creation, (as described by Moses), and ending with Christ's spiritual, or clairvoyant, appearance to St. John in the Revelations'.

³ *Monochordum Mundi* was written in response to Kepler's attacks on Fludd's theories on the macro-microcosm. A simple analysis of this complex debate would picture it as the confrontation between a magus (Fludd) and a mathematician (Kepler). Fludd's chosen medium of expression, like that of all alchemists, was the visual symbol; his harmonies were described by Kepler as 'aenigmaticos, pictos, Hermeticos'. It is interesting to note that Kepler, 'Convinced of the truth of the music of the spheres...sought a movement of the planets in the same proportions that appear in the harmonious sounds of tones and regular polyhedra': Debus, *The Chemical Philosophy*, I, 259. This dichotomy between science (enlightenment) and magic (as a characteristic element within alchemy) is also found in the works of Bacon and Newton who likewise straddle the boundaries of both disciplines.

Fludd based his philosophies upon an interpretation of Mosaic lore (Cabala), which he set out in a volume entitled *Mosaicall Philosophy: Grounded upon the Essentiall Truth or Eternal Sapience*, published posthumously in 1659. This philosophy, which is based upon a mystical alchemical interpretation of Creation, describes how divine light rose from the darkness of primordial Chaos, from which it in turn brought forth the waters. In turn, the elements are born from these waters: ‘earth is dense water, and water is dense air, while on the other hand, air is nothing else than dense and crass fire’.¹ Water is the mother of all four elements, being in primary co-existence with light and darkness. This division of elements conforms with those we have noted in Rossetti’s sonnet: ‘the upper waters became the heavens (fire) [as in the sestet] and the sublunary waters were split into the spheres of air, water, and earth [as in the octave]’.² The division of the sonnet can therefore be seen to express the poet’s desire to journey through, and rise above the material elements of the lower spheres in order to reach the sphere of fire, where he may confront God face to face. This moment of ‘transfiguration’ forms an important motif to which I shall return.

The Monochord as an expression of divine harmony.

Fludd’s Monochord was a contemporary re-expression of the theories of harmonic proportion inherent in number and ratio as conceived by the Pythagorean Brotherhood. The Pythagoreans had found that there existed a mathematical basis within the relationship of notes and scales. They believed that this provided a model by which the universe might be expressed in terms of pure number, and the combination of these ideas led to the belief in an underlying harmony running through all levels of the cosmos, which they called ‘the music of the spheres’, created by the planets as they coursed through the heavens. Joseph Campbell explains:

Pythagoras...whose fundamental dictum, ‘all is number,’ had opened the way to a systematic study of the mathematics of form and harmony which united, as one transcendent science epitomised in music, the laws at once of outer space

¹ Debus, I, 228.

² Ibid. We have noted this in the quotation from Bruno, earlier.

(cosmology), inner space (psychology), and the arts (aesthetics) - the two apparently contrary approaches of the visionary and the empiricist were brought and held together as substantially in accord.¹

A print expressing this concept of the music of the spheres, appears in Francinus Gafurias's *Practica Musice*, published in Florence in 1496 (Fig.27), and this provides a clear precedent for Fludd's illustration of the Monochord.² Here we see the descent of the divine influence as it passes through the spheres to the elemental world (*emanatio*), its rapture in the recognition of the divine source (*raptio*), and its return to that cause (*remeatio*).³ In Pico's Neoplatonic philosophy, this cycle is figuratively expressed in the Three Graces who adorned his personal medal.⁴ The planetary spheres, the nine muses, and the tones of the scale in their Greek modes, are all shown to be interconnected. At the top, informing all Creation, is shown Apollo, holding his lyre.⁵ Inscribed on a scroll above the head of Apollo are the words 'The energy of the Apollonian mind moves everywhere the Muses'.⁶

An aspect of Ficino's 'natural magic' consisted of the drawing down of heavenly influences in order to benefit the individual, and in this, music played an important role, as Frances Yates explains:

¹ 'The Mystery Number of the Goddess', in *In All Her Names: Explorations of the Feminine in Divinity*, ed. by Joseph Campbell and Charles Muses, (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp.55-129 (p.72).

² A facsimile of the Milan edition (same date) is published in New York: Broude Brothers, 1979. For a profound analysis of this image, the reader is directed to the previous citation.

³ This is the same as the Rosicrucian descent, habitation in matter, and return of light to the Source, as derived from Plato.

⁴ See Wind, 'The Medal of Pico della Mirandola' in *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, pp.39-56.

⁵ Mythologically this lyre should be strung with seven strings to symbolise the planetary spheres of the material universe through which the god exerts his influence; here, however, as Campbell points out, it should be strung with four strings to express the Pythagorean Tetrachord. This in turn expresses the unity of the Monochord as being the sum of the mystic Tetrachord: $1+2+3+4 = 10 = 1$. In a sense it is the ouroboros, which both starts and ends simultaneously. The ten points of the Pythagorean Tetractys are very similar in essence to this, and also equate with the ten Sephiroth of the Cabala, although the latter are arranged differently to represent in diagrammatic form the Tree of Life. Both were seen as emanations from the unspeakable and unknowable Primal Cause of pure spiritual light.

⁶ Anderson, in *Dante the Maker*, p.326, points out the parallels between Gafurias's print and the structure of the *Divine Comedy*: 'Apollo-Christ, the sun of righteousness, is the ultimate goal of art. The saving intervention of the three Graces relates to Mary, Beatrice, and Lucia, the trinity of ladies. Beatrice herself is a nine, the number of the Muses, so that, as Dante's own Christian muse, she contains in herself all the qualities of the pagan Muses'.

Ficino used to sing the Orphic songs, accompanying himself probably on a *lira da braccio*. They were set to some kind of simple monodic music which Ficino believed echoed the musical notes emitted by the planetary spheres, to form that music of the spheres of which Pythagoras spoke. Thus one could sing Sun hymns, or Jupiter hymns, or Venus hymns attuned to those planets, and this, being re-enforced by the invocation of their names and powers, was a way of drawing down their influences.¹

To complete our view of Ficino's natural magic, we thus have to think of him drawing down the stellar influences by musical incantations as well as by sympathetic arrangement of natural objects, talismans, exposing oneself to the air, and so on, for the *spiritus* is caught by planetary songs as well as in the other ways described. There may be an even closer connection between the Ficinian talismans and the Ficinian incantations, for in chapter XVIII, after his long and involved defence of his talismans, he seems to say that these are made 'beneath a harmony similar to the celestial harmony' which excites their virtue.²

Yates sees the presence of this type of magic within the work of Botticelli, whose paintings, she believes, operate as receptacles of talismanic magic,³ and the same might be said of Rossetti's. *La Ghirlandata*,⁴ for instance, seems to me to be a perfect example of Ficinian talismanic magic; Venus is shown playing the rose-crowned harp of cosmic harmony surrounded by an excess of lush verdant foliage; her green dress denotes this to be her aspect as Nature. In common with many of Rossetti's paintings in which musical instruments are depicted, they are employed as symbols of an intellectual concept; music as the permeating vibration of divine influence.⁵ *Veronica Veronese*⁶

¹ *Giordano Bruno*, p.78.

² *Ibid*, p.79.

³ 'Far be it from me to attempt yet another detailed interpretation of the figures in the 'Primavera'. I want only to suggest that in the context of the study of Ficino's magic the picture begins to be seen as a practical application of that magic, as a complex talisman, an 'image of the world' arranged so as to transmit only healthful, rejuvenating, anti-Saturnian influences to the beholder.' *Ibid*, p. 77.

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 232, plates 333 and 334. Guildhall Art Gallery.

⁵ William Sharp wrote of this painting, 'The hour is that when the sunset glory is really but a fading memory, when the crimson cloudlet deepens into the purple that is amethyst and the gold and pink into dove... The face of *La Ghirlandata* is spiritual and beautiful, her deep blue eyes transfused with the secret of the music... It is one of those great pictures by Rossetti which could hardly ever become really popular, for its appeal is not that of a representation of the actual but of the ideal; it deals not with

(Fig.28) similarly seems to be also closely linked to the same idea of cosmic harmony permeating the material realms. In this painting, the violin hangs vertically on the wall, while the green-clad maiden languidly plucks at its strings. This painting is a harmony of dark greens, representing both Nature and the abyss of *being*. The girl is pictured poised in the act of listening to both the golden canary on the left, and the note of the violin on the right. The four strings of the instrument correspond to the Pythagorean Tetrachord noted earlier, and as such, it represents the Monochord whose timeless monotone is the groundnote of the universe. The caged golden canary, which one construes as issuing the harmonic, symbolises the pure golden soul of the universe in the centre of the cage of Nature. Thus it echoes the numeric symbolism of the Tetrachord, representing the central unity of the Ten surrounded by the Nine of material creation. This, in turn, corresponds to the sun-symbol of the circle enclosing a central dot.¹ FG Stephens, in his monograph on Rossetti, wrote of this painting that, ‘Rossetti appears here again to be giving expression in art to those associations of sound, colour, and sense... In the like manner the tone and colour schemes of the whole example were constructed in harmonies, and on what may be called musical principles. ... It is one of the last of Rossetti’s works of which music suggests the theme’.²

The concept of occult music as a thread running through all creation is found in the writings of Fludd, as Debus notes:

The science of music really deals with the joining of the elements, the proportions of light and weight in the stars, and their influence on our terrestrial world. Here we shall learn of the spiritual body of the sun and why the influence of Mars brings misfortune. Exact knowledge of such things will come only from speculation and revelation in the occult science of music, which shows how man, here termed the microcosmic palace [the House of Life], agrees in celestial harmony with the macrocosm.

easily-understood domestic sentiment, *but with what has to a few special spiritual significance.*’ (My italics.) *DGR*, pp.229-30.

⁶ Surtees Cat no. 228, plate 325. Bancroft Collection, Wilmington Society of Fine Arts, Delaware.

¹ See my discussion of *Hearts Compass* in Chapter 5.

² *DGR*, pp.82-3.

Therefore happy will be he who is well versed in such mysteries of occult music since without a knowledge of these things it is impossible for anyone to know himself. And without this he will be unable to reach a perfect knowledge of God, for he who understands himself truly and intrinsically perceives in himself the idea of the divine Trinity...¹

Elsewhere Fludd writes:

that deep and true music of the wise, whereby the proportions of natural things are investigated, the harmonical concord and the qualities of the whole world are revealed, by which also connected things are bound together, peace established between conflicting elements, and whereby each star is perpetually suspended in its appointed place by its weight and strength, and by the harmony of its lucent spirit.²

Fludd wrote, 'I affirm that every *Theologus* of the Church Mystical is a real Brother of the Rosy Cross, wheresoever he may be and under what obedience soever to the Churches politic'.³ In order to achieve this end, the musical harmonic was to be employed, as Frances Yates explains:

The common denominator which would weld them all together would be the macro-microcosmic musical philosophy, the mystical alchemy, of which Fludd and Maier were the two chief exponents...

By the diffusion of a philosophy, or a theosophy, or a Pansophia, which they hoped might be accepted by all religious parties, the members of this movement perhaps hoped to establish a non-sectarian basis for a kind of freemasonry - I use

¹ Op. cit., pp.218-9, quoting from Fludd's *Tractatus Apologeticus*.

² Waite, *The Real History of the Rosicrucians*, p.291. Shortly before William's *DGR as Designer and Writer* went to press, he sent the manuscript to Christina for her comments. On *The Monochord*, she wrote; 'Abandoning verbal particulars - don't you think the point may be the common essence (so to say) of all these outward and inward matters? - as if one thread (the musical 'monochord,' but not in the sense of any weight or measure) ran through all, vibrated through all? Thus we should get the sort of truth which the blind man so neatly conveyed who likened *scarlet* to the sound of the trumpet': Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.691. These words make an interesting comparison with those of Fludd.

³ Waite, *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, p.304.

this word here only for its general meaning and without necessarily implying a secret society - which would allow persons of differing religious views to live together peaceably. The common basis would be a common Christianity, interpreted mystically, and a philosophy of Nature which sought the divine meaning of the hieroglyphic characters written by God in the universe, and interpreted macrocosm and microcosm through mathematical-magical systems of universal harmony.¹

In this statement we may find reconciliation of all the conflicting opinions about Rossetti's personal religious views - he appears different things to different commentators because many of these divergent elements found a place within his eclecticism.

In the nineteenth century, Hargrave Jennings wrote on the Rosicrucian theory of music in terms that are clearly derived from Fludd, but which also contains elements present in Rossetti's poetry:

Music (although it is unheard by man) is necessarily produced in the ceaseless operations of material nature, because nature itself is penitential and but the painful (and musical) expression between two dissonant points. The Buddhist contends that all forms are but the penance of nature. Music is life, and life is music. Both are pain, although made delightful. Phenomena are not real.

Thus colours to the human are negative as music addressed to the ear, the musical notes negative as colours addressed to the eye, and so on of the other senses, although they are all the same in the imagination, without the *sensorium* - as dreams show.

The following is a fair view of the Rosicrucian theory concerning music.

The whole world is taken as a musical instrument; that is, a chromatic, sensible instrument. The common axis or pole of the world celestial is intersected - where this superior diapason, or heavenly concord or chord, is divided - by the spiritual sun, or centre of sentience. Every man has a little spark (sun) in his own bosom. Time is only protracted consciousness, because there is

¹ *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.98.

no world out of the mind conceiving it.¹ Earthly music is the faintest tradition of the angelic state; it remains in the mind of man as the dream of, and the sorrow for, the lost paradise. Music is yet master of man's emotions, and therefore of the man.

Heavenly music is produced from impact upon the paths of the planets, which stand as chords or strings, by the cross-travel of the sun from note to note, as from planet to planet; and earthly music is microscopically an imitation of the same, and a 'relic of heaven;' the faculty of recognition arising from the same supernatural musical efflux which produced the planetary bodies, in motived projection from the sun in the centre, in their evolved, proportional, harmonious order. The Rosicrucians taught that the 'harmony of the spheres' is a true thing, and not simply a poetic dream: all nature, like a piece of music, being produced by melodious combinations of the cross-movement of the holy light playing over the lines of the planets: light flaming as the spiritual ecliptic, or the *gladius* of the Archangel Michael, to the extremities of the solar system.

Thus are music, colours, and language allied.²

This notion that colour and musical tone are related is a characteristic of Rosicrucian thought. FG Stephens wrote of Rossetti's *Blue Closet* that:

Such harmony of subject and treatment is ... an exercise intended to symbolise the association of colour with music.³

As to the association of colour with music...we may notice that the sharp accents of the scarlet and green seem to go with the sound of the bell; the softer crimson, purple, and white accord with the throbbing notes of the lute and the clavicord, while the dulcet, flute-like voices of the girls appear to agree with those azure tiles on the walls and floor which gave to this fascinating drawing its name of *The Blue Closet*.⁴

¹ This was a view also held by Blake.

² *The Rosicrucians*, I, 268-70.

³ *DGR*, p.41.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.42.

The sentiments that Rossetti expresses in *The Monochord* do not exist in isolation. An interesting comparison is found in stanzas 45 and 46 of Swinburne's *The Triumph of Time*:

I shall never be friends again with roses;
I shall loathe sweet tunes, where a note grown strong
Relents and recoils, and climbs and closes,
As a wave of the sea turned back by song.
There are sounds where the soul's delight takes fire,
Face to face with its own desire;
A delight that rebels, a desire that reposes;
I shall hate sweet music my whole life long.

The pulse of war and passion of wonder,
The heavens that murmur, the sounds that shine,
The stars that sing and the loves that thunder,
The music burning at heart like wine,
An armed archangel whose hands raise up
All senses mixed in the spirit's cup
Till flesh and spirit are molten in sunder -
These things are over, and no more mine.

This poem was first published in *Poems and Ballads* in 1866, and may be seen as a prototype for the ideas expressed in *The Monochord*. Another of Swinburne's poems, *Monotones*, which was first published in *Songs Before Sunrise*, in 1871, contains a motif of cosmic diversity unified into a single tone:

Therefore, though seven be the strings,
One string, if the harp be smitten,
Sole sounds, till the tune be done;

Sounds without cadence or change
In a weary monotonous burden,
Be the keynote of mourning or mirth. (Sts.3-4)

In this poem, the rainbow hues of the cosmic harmony have been reduced to 'one chord' through the imperfections of material existence and the fallibility of man's actions - the revolutionary theme of this volume (it was dedicated to Mazzini) here stresses that the full glory of this multiplicity will only be restored when wrong has been righted:

One chord, one word, and one way,
One hope as our law, one heaven,
Till slain be the great one wrong. (St.7)

This 'great one wrong' is ultimately the Fall, and the dream is that of Restoration, a return to the Utopian Promised Land. Both Swinburne's and Rossetti's Monochord express not harmony, but discord, which must be struggled against and conquered in order that harmony may once again be restored, both personally and universally. We then understand that this discord is that of the emotions, the sea of the unruly passions, and we recall how, in *The Landmark*, Rossetti had sinned against heaven by disturbing the tranquillity of the sacred waters;

to send its imaged skies pell-mell,
(And mine own image, had I noted well!)

Another interesting example is the first ten lines of Swinburne's *The Sailing of the Swan*, Book IX of *Tristram of Lyonesse*:

Fate, that was born ere spirit and flesh were made,
The fire that fills man's life with light and shade;
The power beyond all godhead which puts on
All forms of multitudinous unison,

A raiment of eternal change inwrought
With shapes and hues more subtly spun than thought
Where all things old bear fruit of all things new
And one deep chord throbs all the music through,
The chord of change unchanging, shadow and light
Inseparable as reverberate day from night.

A further comparison may be found in Baudelaire's *Music*: Beethoven:

Music often takes me like a sea!

To my star pale,
Beneath a hanging mist or boundless sky,
I blithely sail;

Breast forward and my lungs swelled out with air,
Like canvas full,
I scale the heights of waters gathered there
Which darkness veils;

I feel pulsating all the passions:
Ship in distress;
Fair wind, and storm and its commotions

On the abyss
Rock me. At times dead calm, a vast reflection there
Of my despair!¹

¹ *Baudelaire: Selected Poems*, trans. by Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), p.130. It is easy to see why Baudelaire's poetry, with such titles as *The Spiritual Dawn* ('When white and rosy dawn to rakes appears / With the Ideal that ever gnaws away'), appealed to Rossetti and Swinburne. Or *Correspondences*:

Nature's a temple where the pilasters
Speak sometimes in their mystic languages;
Man reaches it through symbols dense as trees ... (St.1)

Sounds, fragrances and colours correspond. (St.2)

This poem appeared in *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, published in 1857, well before Rossetti's *Monochord* was contemplated.¹

Sonnet 60, *Transfigured Life*.

As the opening sonnet of Part II of *The House of Life*, *Transfigured Life* holds an important position. Like *The Sonnet*, which introduces Part I, it is concerned with unity as the product of duality. In this sonnet, the Song, or poem, is represented as stemming from the poet's Joy and Pain, which are described as being 'Its very parents'. Two features of the sonnet demand interpretation. The first of these is the 'Transfigured Life' of the title. On a mundane level, this is easily comprehended as meaning that the images of Rossetti's poetry are not derived specifically from particular episodes in the poet's life, but from its essential experience. They are 'raised up' from the everyday level, and as such, are represented as having a symbolic existence of their own.² In common with many of the sonnets in *The House of Life*, the title acts as a cue to how we should approach the contents. Here, however, it has a life of its own which links it to the imagery of *The Monochord*. The word 'transfigured' itself acts symbolically to suggest an image of a personal confrontation with God. In Exodus 34, when Moses descended from Mount Sinai, 'the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him' (v.30), and 'he put a vail on his face' (v.33). Similarly, in the New Testament:

Jesus...bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.

Matthew 17.1-3.

¹ In November 1864, Rossetti wrote to Swinburne from Paris; 'I tremble for the result of your reading Baudelaire's suppressed poems, the crop of which read I expect you to be in fine flower, not to say fruit, by the time I reach London. If so, and these new revelations are to be printed too, I warn you that the public will not be able to digest them, and that the paternal purse will have to stand the additional expense of an emetic presented gratis with each copy to relieve the outraged British nature': *Letters*, II, 529, letter 565.

² William writes, *Designer and Writer*, pp.224-5, 'This sonnet sets forth (what Rossetti profoundly believed to be the truth concerning good poetry) that 'the song' - i.e., a poem - is the 'transfigured life' of its author; his essential self developed into words under the control of art'.

For the Rosicrucian, the act of transfiguration is the culmination of the Great Work, as Jennings notes:

To be 'glorified,' is when the powers, or independence, are attained which properly appertain to the supernaturally perfect 'Light,' into which, like Enoch or Elijah, the Rosicrucian is transfigured, and in which he knows 'all,' can be 'all,' and do 'all.'¹

Thus one can see that this is the fulfilment of the Neoplatonic ideal 'to become as God'.

The second matter of interest in this sonnet are the enigmatic last lines of the sestet:

By Art's transfiguring essence subtly spann'd;
And from that song-cloud shaped as a man's hand
There comes the sound as of abundant rain.

The immediate explanation is that the 'song-cloud shaped as a man's hand' is itself the 'transfigured life'; it is the child of Joy and Pain transformed by 'Art's transfiguring essence'. The material form of the poet has been transmuted into the ethereal form of a cloud. We should again note here that these three words are all alchemical terms, and the Art referred to is the Royal Art, the Hermetic Art, the Divine Art of Alchemy. It is this transfigured manifestation of the Self that pours forth poetry as 'the sound of abundant rain'.

Gombrich, in *Symbolic Images*, quotes from Girolamo Ruscelli's *Le Imprese Illustri*, Venice, 1566, who writes upon the motif of the sun appearing from behind clouds:

Nearly all the great works which God wrought among us have been performed by His infinite mercy either in clouds or in fire.

There is one reason ... for which we may believe that the Divine and ineffable Goodness shows itself nearly always...enclosed by clouds: it is to teach us...how to raise ourselves up to God by contemplation and by deeds. For just as the

¹ *The Rosicrucians*, II, 137.

world receives from the air the great boon of...rain...so angelic minds, which are like the clouds in relation to the central Sun that is God, bestow on our minds the...rain of grace... In this way the Holy Writ also intends to present us the clouds as guides...to God, and of this we have anagogical and mystical evidence in the column of the cloud that led the Chosen People...to the Promised Land.¹

However, there is another dimension to this problem. In *DGR as Designer and Writer*, William states that the reference is to I Kings 18.² This may help in supplying an alternative perspective. The central theme of I Kings 18 concerns the supremacy of the True God acting through the medium of sacred fire. In this story, the prophet Elijah, in order to alleviate a terrible drought imposed upon the land by God owing to the disobedience of the people in worshipping Baal, challenged four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to what was, in effect, a battle of magic. Each party was to construct a pyre, upon which was placed the offering of a bullock. The true deity was to ignite and consume his pyre with sacred fire in order to establish his power and precedence: 'and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God' (v.24). The prophets of Baal failed. Elijah had his pyre dowsed with water three times, and further encircled his offering with a trench filled with water. 'Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench' (v.38). If we compare this to Fludd's philosophy, in which the 'upper waters' are composed of fire, and the 'lower waters' are composed of air, water, and earth, we here witness the example of heavenly fire descending and consuming the other (material) elements of the sublunary world. In this act they are transmuted and purified in an operation which transfigures Nature itself - the ultimate Rosicrucian dream. In fact Jennings uses this episode to illustrate one of his points.³ After God had consumed the pyre, the prophets of Baal were executed, and there was heard 'a sound of abundant rain' (v.42). Elijah had his servant keep watch over the sea, which he was sent to do seven times, 'And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold there ariseth a

¹ P.164. Also Fig.163.

² Footnote, p.225.

³ In a chapter entitled *Sacred Fire*, Jennings cites this episode as an example of the mystery of God as sacred fire: *The Rosicrucians*, I, 74.

little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand' (v.44). This sign was shortly followed by 'a great rain' (v.45).

But there is more to this than the expression of God as sacred fire. One is reminded of the myth of Demeter (Ceres) and Core (Persephone). When the latter had been abducted to Tartarus by Hades, Demeter, in her grief, forbade productive Nature to grow, with the result that mankind starved. This is essentially the same motif as the terrible drought imposed by God, the result, in both cases, being famine. The Biblical parable is that God consumed the earth with fire (in the form of the drought) which devoured all things, thus making the productive earth barren. We should also note that this symbolic motif corresponds to the Wasteland that is created when the Grail ceases to function and the fertilising waters are withheld until the Grail hero asks the appropriate Question.¹

William notes that 'The "abundant rain" of the conclusion of the sonnet is not, I think, merely "tearful emotion", but also "fertilising and purifying influence"'.² The rain that falls as an aftermath to God's vengeance is the 'fertilising influence' that the drought-stricken earth requires in order that it may again be productive. Elijah's pyre would seem to be a symbol of rain-making magic. We note that the pyre was *three*-times dowsed in water, and that a water-filled trench surrounded it. The falling fire (a metaphor for the heat of the sun) consumed this and the result was 'a sound like of abundant rain'. Later, 'a little cloud like a man's hand' at the *seventh* watching arose 'out of the sea'.³ The image is that of the sun consuming water from which it produces a cloud, which in turn produces rain; in effect, the balance of nature has been restored. We should not neglect the element of human sacrifice present in this ritual.

Imbalance in Nature, as we have earlier noticed, is the result of discord introduced into the cosmic harmonic of the Monochord. Sacred fire without counterbalance is thus destructive. The 'fertilising influence' is restored through water. The male Hand of God (in the form of the cloud) draws water up from the feminine sea in order that the land may again be productive. This is the union of the Sun-god and the Lunar-goddess

¹ We should also note the same motif in Yeats's comments on Morris quoted in the last chapter.

² Loc. cit. Jennings, in *Curious Things*, I, 284, quotes Proclus: 'Moisture is a symbol of life.' The fire and water also correspond to the two agents of purification in the prophecy of St John.

³ The motif of the hand over the sea appears to contain a magical significance: in Exodus 14.16, God commands Moses 'Stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it': 'And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea': 14.21. It appears to express the authority of God over the material world.

in the form of fire and water, whose product is material and spiritual fertility. The 'song' is, as it were, a celebration of this union. In poetic terms, the song-cloud is the product of emotion (water) and air (intellect) produced by fire (spirit). This is expressed as an alchemical truth. Jennings writes that the Earth is 'the common mother from whence all things spring, whose fruitfulness is produced by the threefold operation of fire, air, and water'.¹ This seems to be a re-expression of Fludd's Mosaical Philosophy.

The 'song-cloud shaped as a man's hand' is a symbol derived from the Hand of God, which is traditionally shown issuing from a cloud, and is a familiar device within alchemical illustrations. Just such a hand may be seen tuning Fludd's Monochord.

Sacred Fire.

We have noted in the preceding pages the symbolic use of sacred fire in Zoroastrianism, Dante, Neoplatonic verse, Rossetti's verse, and in Rosicrucian philosophy. Because of the importance of this symbol, it is worth finishing this section with a closer look at its manifestation in nineteenth century Rosicrucianism. Jennings states that the Rosicrucians were known as Fire-philosophers 'who claimed to have discovered the Eternal Fire, or to have found out "God" in the "Immortal Light"'.²

the doctrine of the Fire-Philosophers, and of the Rosicrucians, or *Illuminati*, who taught that all knowable things (both of the soul and of the body) were evolved out of Fire, and finally resolvable into it: and that Fire was the last and only-to-be-known God: as that all things were capable of being searched down into it, and all things were capable of being thought up into it.³

¹ *Curious Things of the Outside World*, I, 284. Jean d'Espagnet wrote in 1608: 'So Nature through continued distillations by sublimation of the Water, by cohobation, or by often drawing off the liquors being often poured on, the body doth rectifie and abound it. In these operations of Nature, the Earth is the Vessel receiving. Therefore the Region of the Air that is nearest to us, being bounded by the Region of Clouds, as by a vaulted chamber, is of a greater thickness and impurity than those regions above' - that is, Fire: Debus, I, 88.

² *The Rosicrucians*, I, 97.

³ *Ibid*, p.103.

It is with immaterial fire (or ghostly fire) that the Rosicrucian loosens contraction and error, and conquers the false knowledge and the deceiving senses which bind the human soul as in its prison. On this side of his powers, on this dark side (to the world) of his character, the alchemist (rather now become the Rosicrucian) works in invisible light, and is a magician. He lays the bridge...between the world possible and the world impossible: and across this bridge, in his Immortal Heroism and Newness, he leads the votary out of his dream of life into his dream of temporary death, or into extinction of the senses and of the powers of the senses; which world's blindness is the only true and veritable life, the envelope of flesh falling metaphorically off the now liberated glorious *entity* - taken up, in charms, by the invisible fire into rhapsody, which is as the gate of heaven.¹

We recognise in these passages many of the motifs present in Rossetti's poetry. The final word on this theme must come from Paracelsus's *Liber Azoth*, 1591:

Since fire cannot burn without the presence of air, one may say of the element of fire that it is of itself nothing other than *a body to the soul* or perhaps *a house in which the soul of man lives*. Therefore fire is the true man about which our whole philosophy is concerned. And if I have now said that no fire can burn without air, I will go on to say that this should be understood correctly - that one should understand under this burning always life. So if I should say by way of an example that something cannot burn, then I also mean that it cannot live.²

¹ Ibid, p. 260. 'These ideas are as equally Christian as Pagan': p.261.

² Debus, I, 87. My italics.

ROSSETTI AND THE ROSE-CROSS.

PART 3: ROSSETTI'S 'MEDIAEVAL' PAINTINGS.

The symbolism of Rossetti's paintings relies almost entirely upon textual rather than visual sources. There are, however, certain important exceptions, but even in these cases, the visual sources are chiefly located within written texts.

Rossetti's 'mediaeval' paintings - that is, those largely painted in the period 1853-62 - form a distinct block of work characterised by two distinctive features: first, by medium, which is watercolour; and secondly, by theme, which is for the most part either mediaeval or Biblical. This group of paintings most often depict several (i.e. two or more) full length figures of both sexes placed in shallow theatrical settings of condensed perspective. In these paintings, imagination is of greater importance than a PRB 'Truth to Nature'; the settings are both intensely colourful and often unrealistic, but this, in turn, provides an alternative reality that is more important than observational fidelity. Some of these paintings take their inspiration from mediaeval miniatures, which also exhibit these qualities. The subject of many of the pictures is idealised love.

In the paintings of this period it is much easier to discern Rossetti's use of Rosicrucian motifs than it is within his verse. I intend to concentrate on three main areas: 1) The Grail and Arthurian themes; 2) themes concerning St George; and 3) themes from Dante.

The symbolism of the Holy Grail.

There are two Arthurian themes which were of particular concern to Rossetti. The first of these is the Holy Grail, and the second is Lancelot's doomed love for Guenevere. They are, of course, intimately connected. From his first meeting with Jane Burden (later Morris), Rossetti seems to have associated himself with Lancelot in his overwhelming and forbidden love for the wife of his close companion. From the start, Rossetti cast Jane in the role of

Guenever in his Oxford Union mural design.¹ In Rossetti's painting, as in the legends, it is this love which prevents Lancelot's achievement of the Grail. The Grail itself is the symbolic object which perhaps comes closest to Rossetti's own conception of mystical spirituality. In the gloom-ridden sonnets of Rossetti's later years, one is tempted to draw a comparison between himself and Lancelot, both of whom experienced failure at the highest level due to their illicit love. In Rossettian terms, this doom arises from his not having achieved the *woman*, that is, Jane. However, both Rossetti and Lancelot fail to achieve the Grail *and* the woman whom they love. To understand this fully, we must first examine how Rossettian symbolism operates through the image of the Grail.

The authors of the Arthurian romances collected cultural and legendary material from many divergent sources and welded them together to form a confusing whole, in which 'is exhibited that remarkable shimmering uncertainty that we have already noticed in connection with the word *Grail*'.² As a result of this eclecticism, the Grail often means different things to different people. Rossetti uses the Grail as an embodiment of the highest spirituality, rather than as a symbol of Christ.

In the majority of the romances, the Grail takes the form of a vessel, and is accompanied by a bleeding lance, a shallow dish, and a sword, and these are known collectively as the Grail Hallows. These represent cult objects of an ancient sacred ritual, which in their final form wear the blazon of Christianity. The Grail vessel and the shallow dish, in Christian terms, represent the chalice and the paten of the Communion; they were identified as the ritual utensils used in the Last Supper super-sanctified by the *actual* body of Christ. The bleeding lance is held to be the lance with which the centurion Longinus pierced the side of Christ. The sword presented a more difficult problem for the romancers, having no obvious connection with Christ, and they identified it as the weapon with which St John Baptist was beheaded. The Catholic Church neither endorsed nor prohibited the Grail Mysteries, maintaining an uneasy silence on the matter. There were two reasons why the Church would be wary of such tales: firstly, because it was well aware that they derived from a pre-Christian heritage, and, secondly, if deemed Christian, they represented the authority of

¹ Doughty, *Victorian Romantic*, p.225, describes this as 'a dramatisation of his own situation'.

² Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, p.289.

both an alternative and higher tradition *direct* from Christ. In one of the earliest versions,¹ Joseph of Arimathea is said to have received both the Grail and the secret words, 'the mystery of the great ceremony of the Grail',² directly from the mouth of Christ.

The Grail Hallows, whether Christian or Pagan, represent cult objects, or holy relics, of the highest degree of sanctity. They are so sacred that they are divine objects worthy of a mystical Quest in their own right, and which, though sought, appear only to the elect. The Grail *chooses* to whom it will appear, and these are very few indeed. In the romances, these knights constitute a male trinity.

In order that we may understand a little of what the Grail may represent, I here turn to two differing views, one held by Jessie Weston, who firmly believes that the Grail Mysteries represent the remnants of a half-understood pagan solar fertility cult, and the other held by A E Waite who holds that they constitute a secret and super-sacred school of mystic Christianity. These views do not actually conflict, but rather complement each other.³

Weston reasons that the Grail Hallows were symbolic objects surviving in folk-memory and tradition from pre-Christian solar fertility rituals. These rituals are still present to this day in folk-ceremony such as sword dances, mumming plays, etc., all of which have their source in the vegetable cycle:

There is a general consensus of opinion among Folk-lore authorities that in this rough drama, which we find played in slightly modified form all over Europe, ... we

¹ It is disputed whether Robert de Boron's trilogy *Joseph of Arimathea*, *Merlin*, and *Perceval*, known as the *Petit Saint Graal*, constitutes the earliest known versions of these legends. De Boron claimed that he took his version from an earlier book, which is not unlikely, although one must allow that mediaeval authors frequently made this claim in order to give their work a historical provenance.

² Jung and von Franz, p.324, quoting de Boron. A different tradition holds that Christ imparted certain secrets to St John the Divine and not to the other Disciples; John was also charged with the care of Mary Virgin after the death of Christ. Thus he took charge of the Holy Vessel of Christ, and inaugurated an alternative tradition to that entrusted to St Peter and the Apostles. St John never ventured out of the East. It is of interest to note that Joseph of Arimathea dedicated the church he founded at Glastonbury to St Mary. Rossetti seems to have been aware that Mary was entrusted to St John, as is shown in the following works: *The Virgin Mary Being Comforted*, 1851, Surtees Cat. no. 51, plate 40; *St John Comforting the Virgin at the Foot of the Cross*, 1857-8, Surtees Cat. no. 104, plate 150; and *Mary in the House of St John*, 1858, Surtees Cat. no. 110, plate 154. The latter title is related to the fifth stanza of Rossetti's poem *Ave*. (In st. 1, Mary is referred to as the 'Groundstone of the great Mystery'.)

³ This despite Waite's impatience with the suggestion of solar mythology: 'At this day it seems weariness, as it is indeed idleness, to go back to the solar mythologies, or otherwise than with great caution to folk-lore': *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*, p.179.

have a symbolic representation of the death and rebirth of the year; a counterpart to those ceremonies of driving out Winter, and bringing in Spring, which we have already described.¹

She quotes Dr Jevons on the common aspect of these performances:

The one point in which there is no variation is that - the character is killed and brought to life again. The play is a ceremonial performance, or rather it is the development in dramatic form of what was originally a religious or magical rite, representing or realising the revivification of the character slain. This revivification is the one essential and invariable feature of all the mummers plays in England.²

These plays generally include the figure of St. George who plays an important part in the action. The plays, Weston argues, are the remnants of the solar cult:

whether he be called Tammuz, Attis, or Adonis, the main lines of the story are fixed, and invariable. Always he is young and beautiful, always the beloved of a great goddess; always he is the victim of a tragic and untimely death, a death which entails bitter loss and misfortune upon a mourning world, and which, for the salvation of that world, is followed by a resurrection. Death and Resurrection, mourning and rejoicing, present themselves in sharp antithesis in each and all of the forms.³

These, significantly, are the Joy and Pain of Sonnet 60, *Transfigured Life*. This god represents the spirit of the life-force itself; he is *Life*. But he is also only semi-divine, because he spends his time divided between heaven, earth, in which he is literally rooted (as the spirit of vegetation), and the underworld where he is lover of Persephone. He is the Year King, and his movements are governed by Aphrodite and Persephone, between whom his life is spent.

¹ *From Ritual to Romance*, p.96.

² *Ibid*, p.119-20. She is here quoting from *Masks and the Origin of the Greek Drama*.

³ *Ibid*, p.143.

The Grail myth may well derive from an ancient and barbaric form of the ritual murder of the Year King, of which the Hallows were originally the instruments of execution. The bleeding lance is the primary means of inflicting the injury, either in the groin (the symbolic source of life),¹ or the side (like Christ), and the blood is collected from these wounds in the bowl. The victim is then beheaded with the sword, and the head is presented to the representative of the Goddess on the shallow dish.² The body is then hacked to pieces with the sword, and the parts are placed on the dish for consumption by the initiates, along with the drinking of the blood from the bowl. The initiates thus symbolically consume their god, or rather *actually* consume their *symbolic* god.³ This is the foundation of the celebration of the Christian Eucharist, where the wine replaces the sacred blood, and the bread replaces the sacred body of the deity.⁴ I suggest that where in the Grail romances the sword is

¹ It is an essential facet of the Grail stories that the wounded King is not allowed death, but kept in a state of half-life, half-death, until the new King is found and asks the appropriate Question. Baring and Cashford note: 'The castrated high priest of Cybele was regarded as Attis himself... The shadowy lineaments of the old vegetation and initiation rites come into focus: it is more than likely that castration, like circumcision, was at one time substituted for the ritual killing of the king or high priest. Originally, Cybele may have had a single high priest and king, her 'son-lover', who was at first killed but whose genitals in a later era were offered in sacrifice instead of his life because their potency was believed to fertilize the earth they fell upon': *Myth of the Goddess*, p.407. See also pp.409-10.

² The dance of Salome, the beheading of John the Baptist at her request, and the presentation of his head to her on a plate is suggestive of this ritual: see Manuela Dunn Mascetti, *The Song of Eve: Mythology and Symbols of the Goddess* (London: Aurum Press, 1994), p.137. In some versions of the Grail legend, a severed head is displayed on a shallow dish. The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a remembrance of the ritual beheading of the Year King as the Spirit of Vegetation. Sir Gawain acts the part of the tanist who, in due turn, must surrender to this rite the following year end.

³ The sacrificial death of Hercules as sacred king is described by Graves, *White Goddess*, pp.125-6: 'The manner of his death can be reconstructed from a variety of legends, folk customs and other religious survivals. At mid-summer, at the end of a half-year reign, Hercules is made drunk with mead and led into the middle of a circle of twelve stones arranged around an oak, in front of which stands an altar-stone; the oak has been lopped until it is T-shaped. He is bound to it with willow thongs in the 'five-fold bond' which joins wrists, neck and ankles together, beaten by his comrades till he faints, then flayed, blinded, castrated, impaled with a mistletoe stake, and finally hacked into joints on the altar-stone. His blood is caught in a basin and used for sprinkling the whole tribe to make them vigorous and fruitful. The joints are roasted at twin fires of oak-loppings, kindled with sacred fire preserved from a lightning-blasted oak or made by twirling an alder- or cornel-wood fire-drill in an oak log. ... The twelve merry-men rush in a wild figure-of-eight dance around the fires, singing ecstatically and tearing at the flesh with their teeth. The bloody remains are burnt in the fire, all except the genitals and the head. These are put into an alder-wood boat and floated down a river to an islet; though the head is sometimes cured with smoke and preserved for oracular use. His tanist succeeds him and reigns for the remainder of the year, when he is sacrificially killed by a new Hercules.'

⁴ 'Jesus Christ is himself both priest and sacrifice, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the species of bread and wine; the bread being substantiated into the body and the wine into the blood, by the power of God': the confirmation of the Real Presence of Christ's body, by the

broken, or is fated to break at the fateful stroke, this represents the defeat and death of the old King, the sword being the emblem of his rule and power.¹ One might suggest that the disappearance of the solar-cult corresponds with the disappearance of the Grail with the last and perfect knight, Galahad.² It will be noted that the ending of the Quest for the Grail brings about the destruction of the Round Table. In symbolic mythological terms, the Round Table stands for the rotating circle of the heavens:

After this table the Round Table was set up, on the advice of Merlin; nor was it established without great symbolic significance. For what is meant by being called the Round Table is the roundness of the world and the condition of the planets and of the elements in the firmament; and the conditions of the firmament are seen in the stars and in countless other things; so that one could say that in the Round Table the whole universe is symbolized.³

The heavenly table was supposed to be reflected in the landscape around Glastonbury and this belief still lingers today. In 1580, John Dee, the proto-Rosicrucian, went to this area to take notes, drawing in the figures of the zodiac on a map.⁴ It is thus that the sacred

Fourth Lateran Council, 1215. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991), pp. 541-2.

¹ In Wolfram's *Parzival*, the hero's sword breaks upon the helm of his half-brother, which represents his symbolic defeat at the hands of his 'brother', or tanist. It is a characteristic of the Grail hero's sword that it is destined to break when it is most needed. In other words, the old King is predestined to lose the contest of the ritual battle. The sword as a symbol of power and authority is a traditional motif on west of Scotland mediaeval grave-slabs.

² It is intriguing to think that Galahad, the perfect knight and type of Christ, is the one who departs to heaven with the Grail: is he the final and most perfect solar Year-King masquerading as Christ, or the final Christianisation of the Year-King who effectively puts an end to the Grail's presence on earth?

³ Jung and von Franz, p.163, quoting Pauphilet, *La Queste du Saint Graal*.

⁴ Lampo and Koster, *Arthur and the Grail*, pp.112-4. They write further: 'According to her [Kathleen Maltwood], the Zodiac's constellations correspond to figures and animals encountered by the heroes of *Perlesvaus* at the appropriate points in their quest, which would point to a very ancient initiation rite. It is remarkable in this respect that in the prose *Lancelot*, Perceval's aunt recounts that the Round Table was made by Merlin and is particularly important since it represents the vault of the heavens with the stars and planets. This can hardly refer to a mundane piece of furniture, and so we look it up in *Perlesvaus* and discover there that the Round Table could feed 1000 people and 150 bulls. This ecological reference can clearly be used to imply that this was a whole district with a special astrological or astronomical significance.'

relationship between land and heavens is broken, betokening a war that will end the Round Table, the death of Arthur and his knights, and a return to the state of the Wasteland.

The transition of the Grail Hallows from pagan cult objects to Christian symbols of the Eucharist depends upon their sharing the same roots in pre-Christian culture. Weston states:

That Christianity might have borrowed from previously existing cults certain outward signs and symbols, might have accommodated itself to already existing Fasts and Feasts, may be, perforce has had to be, more or less grudgingly admitted; that such a *rapprochement* should have gone further, that it should even have been inherent in the very nature of the Faith, that, to some of the deepest thinkers of old, Christianity should have been held for no new thing but a fulfilment of the promise enshrined in the Mysteries from the beginning of the world, will to many be a strange and startling thought. Yet so it was, and I firmly believe that it is only in the recognition of this one-time claim of essential kinship between Christianity and the Pagan Mysteries that we shall find the key to the Secret of the Grail.¹

In his book *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*, AE Waite, while acknowledging that 'the roots of it lie deep in folk-lore of the pre-Christian period',² nonetheless sees the Grail of the romances as an expression of deep Christian mysticism. Waite takes as his starting point the secret words putatively spoken by Christ to Joseph of Arimathea - 'those holy words that are properly called the Secrets of the Grail'³ - to argue the existence of a super-sacred form of the Eucharist, which perhaps existed parallel to, but over and above, that of

¹ Op. cit., p.149. She sums this up, pp.203-4: 'The Grail story is not....the product of imagination, literary or popular. At its root lies the record, more or less distorted, of an ancient Ritual, having for its ultimate object the initiation into the secret of the sources of Life, physical and spiritual. ... In its esoteric 'Mystery' form it was freely utilised for the imparting of high spiritual teaching concerning the relation of Man to the Divine Source of his being, and the possibility of a sensible union between Man, and God. The recognition of the cosmic activities of the Logos appears to have been a characteristic feature of this teaching, and when Christianity came upon the scene it did not hesitate to utilize the already existing medium of instruction, but boldly identified the Deity of Vegetation, regarded as Life Principle, with the God of the Christian Faith. Thus, to certain of the early Christians, Attis was but an earlier manifestation of the Logos, Whom they held identical with Christ. The evidence of the Naassene document places this beyond any shadow of doubt'.

² P.11.

³ Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, p.549, quoting Robert de Boron.

the orthodox Church.¹ What Waite hints at is an alternative and higher tradition, and this is indeed possible, although the thesis of his book is that if it existed, it was (and still is), entirely compatible with orthodox Catholicism. However, there is a flaw in this argument, which has also been recognised by Campbell, who rightly poses the question:

For what reason, pray, should a Christian knight ride forth questing for the Grail when at hand, in every chapel, were the blessed body and blood of Christ literally present in the sacrament of the altar for the redemption and beatitude of his soul?²

For the mediaeval mind, the orthodox Eucharist was already the highest symbol of Christianity in that it represented Christ's *actual* body and blood: there could be nothing more sacred.

For Waite, 'the history of the Holy Graal becomes the soul's history, moving through a profound symbolism of inward being, wherein we follow as we can'.³ He further sees the romances as parables through which we may achieve a mystic vision: 'The Mystery of the Holy Graal is the sun of a great implicit rising in the zones of consciousness'.⁴ The most interesting thing to be drawn from Waite's long and ponderous book, is that he understands this Quest of the soul, the Grail Quest, as most closely corresponding with the alchemical Quest: 'I put forward ... the Sacramental Mystery of Alchemy as corresponding to the Eucharistic Mystery of the Holy Graal',⁵ and, 'The voice of spiritual alchemy, succeeding that of the Graal, is the voice of the Graal literature under another veil'.⁶ This is because the processes which the soul undertakes in the Quest for the Grail are intimately linked to a similar process in mystic alchemy. He further adds:

¹ Waite, *Hidden Church*, p.138: 'We are left therefore with two claims which appear to be at the root of the Mystery of the Holy Graal, as it is manifested in the French literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: these are the claim of an Eucharistic formula, the validity and efficacy of which transcended the words of institution known by the official Church, and the claim of a priesthood which did not draw from the official apostolate, though it did not question its authority.'

² *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, p.507.

³ *Hidden Church*, p.494.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.508.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.599. He also suggests 'the mystical pageant of Kabalism as analogical to the Graal pageant [and] certain quests in Masonry as synonymous with the Graal Quest'.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.684.

It follows ... that the higher understanding of the Eucharist and the mystic side of alchemy are concerned with the same subject, that is to say, with man, his conversion and transfiguration: the implicits are therefore the same, and of these things alchemy was the next witness in the world after the epoch of the Holy Grail.¹

Jung and von Franz fully support this concept, importantly adding that it was the presence of alchemical ideas within the Grail romances that brought about a full realisation of the potential of Christianity in reconciling and then further developing the conflicting qualities inherent in Christianity.² They state: 'As Jung has shown, the symbolism of alchemy served on the whole as a receptacle in which contents that were in a compensatory and complementary relationship to official Christianity found expression, and *it is therefore no accident that such close connections can be traced between alchemy and the symbols of the Grail story.*'³ In alchemy, the problems of fallen Nature, the corruption of the feminine, and evil in both Man and the Self, were not rejected as in Christianity, but confronted, embraced, and the opposites formed by this dualism reconciled. Thus dualistic symbolism and confrontations with the lower aspect of the Self form an important part of the Grail stories.

The writers of the Grail romances were unanimous in insisting that the Quest could only be undertaken individually. The Grail knights ride off in different directions into the forest, 'in the dark wood', as Dante puts it in his own Quest poem. The alchemical Quest - at least that of spiritual alchemy - is likewise a singular experience. The Castle of the Grail, towards which the knights venture, is something not of this world: it is hidden, and can only be reached once the difficulties of the Quest have been completed. Even then the successful Grail Knight is he chosen by the Grail itself. Like the Quest of alchemy, it is in a sense an inner journey that has to be accomplished. In alchemy, the Great Work is often illustrated as a steep and difficult mountain similar to Dante's Purgatory or Wolfram's Monsalvasche.

¹ Ibid, p.546-7.

² An example of this would be the Christian attitude towards women and Nature, both of which had to be conquered and risen above.

³ *The Grail Legend*, p.101. Author's italics.

On a metaphorical level, one may understand the Wasteland to be the Self which lies barren by the loss of the Godhead; the Grail Castle, which appears and disappears at will, may be seen as the Castle of Faith; the wounded Grail King is another aspect of Self; the Grail Maiden, who carries the Grail in the pageant, may be seen as the Soul; and the Grail itself as the Godhead in person. Alternatively, the Wasteland may also be seen as a Godless and corrupt society in which the Self operates collectively on an external level. Waite makes essentially the same point:

We know that in the last analysis it is the inward man who is really the Wounded Keeper. The mysteries are his; on him the woe has fallen; it is he who expects healing and redemption. His body is the Graal Castle, which is also the castle of Souls, and behind it is the Earthly Paradise as a vague and latent memory. ... He who enters into the consideration of this secret and immemorial house under fitting guidance shall know why it is that the Graal is served by a pure maiden, and why that maiden is ultimately dispossessed. Helayne is the soul, and the soul is in exile because all the high unions have been declared voided - the crown has been separated from the kingdom, and experience from the higher knowledge.¹

There are two important points to be made here. Firstly, that the Grail romances are obviously operating as metaphors for, and towards, a higher wisdom, in exactly the same manner as the later Rosicrucians - and in particular Maier - employed classical mythology as a medium for their message. Secondly, the Grail Maiden, Helayne, Elaine, or Repanse de Schoye, in representing the pure virgin soul, is the exact counterpart of the soul maiden in Rossetti's *Hand and Soul*: 'A woman was present in his room, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, fashioned to that time.'² This is exactly how he paints *The*

¹ *Hidden Church*, p.511. In this passage we find two of Rossetti's symbols: 'this secret and immemorial house', which equates with the House of Life; and the 'pure maiden' of the Grail who inhabits it, who is essentially Rossetti's vision of the soul, in *Hand and Soul*.

² *Works*, I, 391. This vision also corresponds to the Earth Goddess, who is alternately clad in the green of summer and the grey of winter. Rossetti uses this colour symbolism in the sonnets, as for example in no. 42, *Hope Overtaken*. These colours also represent the contrast between the green of Grail fertility and the grey of the Wasteland.

Damsel of the Sanct Grael, dressed in green and grey.¹ Likewise, her hair is represented as 'the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams'.² The hero of *Hand and Soul*, Chiaro dell' Erma, like the Grail Knight, 'was like one who, scaling a great steepness, hears his own voice echoed in some place much higher than he can see, and the name of which is not known to him', to which the Maiden answers, 'I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee'.³ Chiaro is the direct equivalent of the Grail Knight. His achievement, however, is to paint rather than to achieve the Grail. Waite makes a relevant point:

The process of the art is without haste or violence by the mediation of a graduated fire, and the seat of this fire is in the soul. It is a mystery of the soul's love, and for this reason she is called 'undaunted daughter of desire.' The sense of the gradation is that love is set free from the impetuosity and violence of passion, and has become a constant and incorruptible flame.⁴

Although Waite is here describing alchemical 'art', the same process operates in *Hand and Soul* and the Grail Quest.

In essence, all Rossetti's women are Grail Maidens. In fact, we may go even further than this and state that they are themselves Rossetti's Grail. From as early as *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (*Here is the Handmaiden of the Lord!*), woman has represented the Vessel of the Godhead for Rossetti, that is, the Vessel of the Grail.⁵

The image of the Grail is not separate from the symbolism we have encountered in previous chapters. The symbolism of the Holy Grail is identical with the symbolism of the Rose-Cross, a contention that can be demonstrated by an examination of *How Sir Galahad*,

¹ This is the first version of 1857.

² *Works*, I, 392.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Hidden Church*, p.542.

⁵ John Matthews, *The Grail: Quest for the Eternal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p.16, writes: 'Mary, the Theotokos, or God-Bearer, is the vessel destined to contain the spirit made flesh. With this becoming, God enters the world. ... The Grail...thus becomes like the womb of Mary, a house of God... new light and life is contained in the Grail-as-chalice, and in this image it is at its most sacramental: a 'hallow' of mankind. In imagery such as this we find the Troubadours addressing Mary as 'Grail of the World', and applying the term with equal validity to the 'lady' of the rose garden: 'The beloved one is the heart's Grail, her lover will not be alone, for she is to him the highest Grail, which protects from every woe.'

Sir Bors, and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; But Sir Percival's Sister Died by the Way, 1864¹ (Fig.29).

This design originated in a series of sketches for the Oxford Union murals of 1857.² The design, completed in 1864, is a late example which displays all the characteristics of Rossetti's watercolour period. The concentrated colour, compressed depth, and overall lighting combine to provide an otherworldly atmosphere that has all the intensity of a vision.

If vision it be, it is a vision with a message, and the message it bears resides in the symbolism of the piece, which is unashamedly Rosicrucian. On the extreme left-hand side of the painting is the altar of the Grail, and it will be noted that Rossetti has depicted only half of it, the rest lying outside the picture area. This is a device of concealment he uses elsewhere.³ However, enough of the altar is shown to determine that the altar-cloth displays the Rosy-Cross, red against a white ground, contained in a circle of red. This is a classic form of the Rosy-Cross.⁴ On the top of the altar is shown part of a seven armed candlestick, the Menorah, which I take to symbolise the Cabalistic aspect of the Rose-Cross. Above the altar hovers a white dove, which in the Grail literature is one of the heraldic devices of the Grail. In its beak it bears a censer, which again is symbolic of the Grail. Before the altar stands the Grail Maiden wearing a surplice of gold edged with red; the gold denoting the highest degree of perfection and inviolability. This is echoed by the lily sprouting before her, the blooms of which are surrounded by a holy glow. The white dress she wears beneath this is patterned with two symbolic devices: one is a blue circle with a greenish spiral, perhaps suggesting vegetable regeneration; the other is the circular pattern of golden dots which is a symbol of universal and spiritual unity. In her right hand she holds the cup of the Grail which she hands to the perfect knight, Sir Galahad. In her left hand she holds the holy bread of the Eucharist. It is perhaps worth noting the similarity

¹ Surtees Cat no. 94 R1, plate 126. Tate Gallery.

² The seven artists involved were Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Morris, Arthur Hughes, Val Prinsep, Spencer Stanhope, and John Hungerford Pollen.

³ For instance in *The Chapel Before the Lists*, 1857. Surtees Cat no. 99, plate 135. Tate Gallery. Here the Rose-Cross is half shown on the altar, upon which is a Grail-like chalice.

⁴ Jennings uses the symbol of Red-Cross on a circular silver ground on the blue bindings of his *The Rosicrucians: Their Rites and Mysteries*. The colour system red, white, and / or blue is characteristic, as I have already shown. Wigston uses the red cross-in-circle in the frontispiece of his *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*.

between the Grail Maiden in this painting and the figure of *Mary Magdalene Leaving the House of Feasting*, 1857.¹

As the Grail Maiden hands the Grail to Sir Galahad, the two figures form part of a masterful link that carries across the design, as Sir Galahad in turn extends his left arm to clutch the hand of one of the two knights behind him. Here, Rossetti best displays his design skills at their greatest power. Compare his earlier illustration *The Maids of Elfenmere*, 1854,² which also displays a rhythmical quality that carries across the design from left to right. There is little to note in the figure of Sir Galahad except the design on his surcoat. Upon a white ground, it displays a pattern of a stalk of three leaves in green, interspaced with what appears to be either a larger leaf, or possibly a tree, also in green, around the top of which are a series of yellow dots. This I take to represent vegetable regeneration. Around the bottom of his surcoat there is a red band with alternating motifs of vertical gold crosses interposed with gold circles bearing a diagonal cross motif. The sloppy paint control of these motifs renders them almost unintelligible.

I pass on to the figures of the two knights behind Sir Galahad, and in particular to the foremost figure, the other being obscured behind him. Sir Percival wears a surcoat on which we quite plainly see a Rosicrucian motif. On a white ground is a red lattice with red roses interspaced at the intersections to provide a pattern of red Rose and Cross. It is interesting to note that William Morris employed a similar, though more elaborate, motif for his first wallpaper design, *Trellis*, 1862. It is generally acknowledged that Masonry reads into Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* a description of the passage through the Masonic rites.³ Whether or not this was in any way intended by Rossetti, is impossible to ascertain, although it is undeniable that several aspects of the Grail quest were borrowed by both Freemasons and Victorian Rosicrucians.⁴

¹ Surtees Cat no. 88, plate 113. Tate Gallery.

² Surtees Cat no. 67. Illustrated in Faxon, *DGR*, p.91. This design was for the frontispiece of William Allingham's *Day and Night Songs*.

³ Jessie Weston writes: 'The *Perceval* story is a charming story, but it has originally nothing whatever to do with the Grail. ...the fact that the hero of the Folk-tale was known as 'The Widow's Son', which he actually was, while this title represented in Mystery terminology a certain grade of Initiation, and as such is preserved to-day in Masonic ritual': *From Ritual to Romance*, pp.206-7.

⁴ For instance, the concept of the Quest was itself significant, as also was that of Chivalry and a Chivalric Order and Code. Both are present in Digby's *Broad Stone* and Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe*. It will be particularly noted that Digby's Castle conforms to, or mirrors, the description of the Grail Castle. Also, at a

Lying at the feet of these figures is the dead body of Sir Percival's sister, who gave her life in an act of self-sacrifice to save the life of another lady. The motif of self-sacrifice, is another recurrent Rosicrucian theme. This lady met her death through the willing donation of her blood. In this we are reminded of the symbol of the Pelican, who gives her life-blood that her young may live by it. It will be noted that in Christian terms this role is taken by Christ, but here the sacrifice is made by a woman. Further, the blood she donates is collected in a bowl. Let us put these symbols together: 1) a blood-sacrifice ; 2) the blood is collected in a bowl, and ; 3) the lady plays the part of the Saviour. The Grail Mystery itself is played out in these tokens, with the Saviour figure transformed into a female.

Moving on, our eye is drawn to the golden curtain that divides the action in the foreground from that behind. This division of space is a device that Rossetti takes from mediaeval illuminations and also uses in other places. The wicker fence which supports the curtain is a common feature in mediaeval illustrations; it is also borrowed by Burne-Jones in his illustrations for Morris. The gold of the curtain again denotes the purity of incorruptible perfection. We are reminded of 'the gold bar of heaven' in *The Blessed Damozel*. It is decorated with a pattern of blue circles in which appear red crosses, another manifestation of the Rose-Cross. As I have pointed out earlier, in Rosicrucian symbolism, blue stands for matter, and red stands for the spirit. It will be noted that similar motifs appear on the wings of the angels in the background of *The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra*. Behind this curtained fence stands a row of angels wearing white robes decorated with the diagonal red Rosicrucian cross tied 'crossways' over their shoulders as described in *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*. These angels are borrowed directly from Blake's illustrations for the Book of Job,¹ plate 14, *The Morning Stars Sang Together*.

Rossetti depicted the Grail in another watercolour entitled *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael*, 1857.² This relatively small and simple painting is so stylised that it becomes a symbolic icon of enormous power. The Grail Maiden here is represented full-length dressed in green, grey, and blue. Behind her head a flattened golden ellipse may be either halo or

later date Walter Crane (among others) uses Rosicrucian emblems in connection with Chivalry and the concept of Quest is an important motif in his illustrations.

¹ It will be recalled that the author of the Book of Job was one of the PRB Immortals.

² Surtees Cat. no. 91, plate 117. Tate Gallery.

sun, and her hair fans out like fire-coloured rays from around her. A dove carrying a censer in its beak, a symbol of the Grail, hovers over her head. She holds her right hand in benediction, while her left holds the long-stemmed vessel of the Grail. From this hand also hangs a basket holding the holy bread, covered over with a strip of white cloth. Around her waist is a golden girdle, upon which is Rossetti's simplified Rosicrucian symbol for the Rose and Cross, OXOXO, picked out in red. In this depiction of the Grail the accompanying Hallows of bleeding lance, sword, and shallow dish are not represented; as indeed they are not in any of Rossetti's Grail paintings. This is significant, as is the fact that the Grail Maiden, besides bestowing the Benediction, also carries the wine and bread of the Eucharist.

A much later painting also depicts *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael*, 1874.¹ Although the title is identical, this later painting is entirely different in treatment. This is Rossetti's perfected late style, and shows the Grail Maiden half length in a large rendering in oil. Here she is shown with her head facing three-quarters to the left (her right), and dressed in a richly embroidered robe. A large and rather awkward looking dove appears to be entangled in her hair, again bearing the censer in its beak. This time she holds her left hand in benediction, while a singularly un-spectral vessel of the Grail rests on her right; we should note that the order of the hands is reversed in this painting. She is surrounded by dense vine leaves as if appearing from a shrubbery. These symbolise the True Vine of Christ, or his earlier prototype, the vegetation god Dionysus.

It is of some importance that Jane Morris does not figure as the Grail Maiden. This displays a shift of thinking on Rossetti's part between the earlier watercolour work, and the oils of the later period. In the earlier painting - and here I am cautious about *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors, and Sir Percival Were Fed With the Sanc Grael*² - of the Grail

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 91 R1. Private collection. The only printed illustration in a modern publication of which I am aware appears on p.23 of Faxon. This is an uncharacteristic painting, which seems hard to believe to be by Rossetti's own hand: composition, colouring, and detail are all unconvincing. Surtees tells us that the model is Alexa Wilding, although her image in the painting is unlike any other portrayal of her by Rossetti.

² The date of this painting is 1864, a little after the watershed year of 1862 which more or less determines the change of both Rossetti's style and his models. The concept of this painting dates back to the Oxford Union days, and both the Grail Maiden and the angels exhibit the characteristics of Rossetti's dead wife - this may well have been a tribute to her. However, we cannot say that the model for this definitely was

Maiden, Elizabeth is the model. In the later painting of the same subject, Rossetti uses Alexa Wilding in this role. Jane Burden takes another role in this mythos, one in which she appears with consistency - Guinevere. And by implication, Rossetti takes the role of Lancelot.

Lancelot and Guinevere.

Earlier in this work, I suggested that Jane ultimately represented the Lunar Queen and Rossetti, the Solar King. Lancelot is one of the solar heroes of the Arthurian cycle, while Guinevere remains the supreme example of the Lunar Queen.¹ The court of the Round Table, a symbol of the heavenly constellations, revolves around the Queen and her consort. While Arthur appears to be the central pivot of the circular table (in much the same way as does Christ with his disciples), after the initial establishment of his kingship, he disappears into the background until the time arrives (after the achievement of the Grail), for the final settlement with Mordred. Arthur, for the greater part of the romances is not pre-eminent, his heroic place being taken by the shining near-perfect figure of Lancelot, the Queen's champion.

Here we return to Rossetti's design for the Oxford Union murals, and the depiction of Lancelot's failure to achieve the Grail because of his love for Guinevere. As I have previously shown, Guinevere is depicted as the Celtic Apple Queen. On a symbolically personal level a trinity is established, in which Lizzie Siddal plays the part of the Grail Maiden, Jane the Queen, and Rossetti, Lancelot², who is denied the Grail through his illicit

Elizabeth - she certainly was not present to model - more that this figure seems to embody a notion of her, as she had modelled for this role in the past.

¹ Mary Andere, *Arthurian Links with Herefordshire* (Little Logaston, Herefordshire: Logaston Press, 1995), p.56, writes: 'The Latin form of Lancelot's name is Lucius Hibernus... The Welsh form is Llwch Llwinawg, or Lleymynawg, Luke, Lord of the Lakes'. Both Lucius and Luke are ultimately derived from *lux*, 'light'. Flavia Anderson, *The Ancient Secret: In Search of the Holy Grail*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), p.41, writes: 'Lancelot's name is derived from the lance which he carried. And Lot or Lud is the British equivalent of the Irish and Welsh gods of light, Lugh and Llew.' Andere writes, p.63, that the name Guinevere, or Gwenhwyvaer, means 'the white phantom', 'the white shadow' or 'the white falcon'. 'All through the Arthurian Saga there are hints that Arthur was married at least twice, and possibly a third time. ... Each wife is said to have been called Guinevere'. Put together, this is a clear indication of the triple White Goddess who inhabits the skies.

² This part is played by Burne-Jones in Rossetti's painting.

love. But it will be noted that despite the many travails suffered by Lancelot, he is the only knight actually to survive the destruction of the kingdom of Arthur. This is true also of the Queen. The two are intimately linked, almost as if they share a fate.

Lancelot, we are told in the romances, is descended from Joseph of Arimathea, and ultimately, is therefore of the line of King David. He is thus related to Christ himself, and he is therefore of the race of the Holy Grail Kings. He was baptised Galahad,¹ and at an early age was taken away by the Lady of the Lake with whom he remained till he was eighteen. He would thus appear to have been brought up as a devotee of the Lunar-goddess. This would explain his appellation 'du Lac'. We may infer from this that the Lady of the Lake is the water deity herself, the Lunar Goddess, or her priestess, and that Lancelot was given to her to perform a special function.² I offer the suggestion that in fact the name Lancelot is a title connected with the Bleeding Lance of the Grail Hallows: perhaps Lancelot's function was once that of sacred executioner. His true name, which he abandons, is Galahad. Again, he is the Queen's Champion, - the Queen's instrument, - and if the Queen is Lunar, then this would make perfect sense.

What, then, is the Queen's role? It is not simply that she is the wife of the King, and her infidelity is not simple adultery. Because she is the wife of the Sun King, her role implicitly requires that she adopts a new partner when necessary. It would seem that Lancelot fulfilled this function, usurping the role of the King, as Lampo and Koster relate:

In spite of their relative candour, we are still repeatedly left with the impression that the Christian Middle Ages did not quite know what to make of the adulterous, in their eyes plainly sinful relationship between Sir Lancelot and his queen, Guinevere. Meanwhile, the situation seems to reflect such a deeply rooted pattern that there was just no way round it, even for the most pious of poets. More than the queen's

¹ The name Galahad was also given to a son of Joseph of Arimathea. Thus it would appear to have some sort of hereditary connotation - perhaps even a title. Waite, *Hidden Church*, pp.333-4

² The name 'Lady of the Lake' may have been a title for a priestess (i.e. a Druidess) of the Lunar Goddess. Merlin, far from being tricked out of his magic by the Lady of the Lake as Malory and Tennyson have it, would in fact have *derived* his magic from this deity. His surrender of himself to the cave in the rocks or to the whitethorn is symbolic of his devotion to the Goddess, for they are her symbols, as is the lake. It is possible that this motif refers to some form of ritual initiation or sacrifice. Merlin is literally absorbed into the body of the tree or the rock, both of which are symbols of the Goddess.

lover, the Lancelot of mythology is the substitute king. In this way he becomes in fact as important as, if not more important than, Arthur, who is already living in the psychological shadow of Avalon's eternity. Furthermore, we have the impression that Lancelot is not Guinevere's only lover. Think of the adventure with the mysterious Melwas-Maleagant, the lord of the Summer Country, who kidnaps her and, with or without her consent, sexually possesses her. ...Kay, usually represented as elderly, the dynamic Gawain, Yder, Mordoc and Caradoc, who apparently all in their turn have played the part of the substitute king.¹

However, the relationship between Lancelot and the Queen outweighs all others, and is a central theme of the romances. Its importance provides a hint that another relationship once lay behind the overlay of Courtly Love; that is, Lancelot's devotion to the Lunar Queen, and his functionary status as her instrument. This is especially the case when one considers that he is of the line of the Grail Kings.

Moreover, the very instrument of the King's downfall is the result of an incestuous coupling with his half-sister. Mordred, born on May 1st, Mayday, is the ultimate Year-King who seeks to usurp Arthur and take Guinevere for his own. Here, we must remember that Arthur finally slays Mordred with a spear, before he himself is mortally wounded in the head by Mordred's sword.² This, in strangled form, is the motif we noted earlier of the ritual death of the Year King. Yet, strangely, Lancelot stands aloof from all this; he has another task to perform, and that is the begetting of Galahad, the final Grail Knight, on Elaine the Grail-maiden. Galahad, son of Lancelot, and the last and most perfect of his line and name, takes the Grail to Sarras, where both are transported to heaven.³ Thus ends the succession of Year Kings and Grail Kings of the line of David. We should note that in the

¹ *Arthur and the Grail*, p.152. Dunbar writes: 'Guenevere of necessity had numerous rescuers, because each character of solar significance played the part of the rescuer of the sun's female counterpart. Guenevere's vegetation significance is suggested, among other scenes, in her Maying party before one of her abductions': *Symbolism in Mediaeval Thought*, p.432, fn.93 (cont. from previous page).

² Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. by Janet Cowen, 2 vols (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), Book XXI, Chapter 4, II, 514.

³ Dunbar writes: 'Galahad, having refound the Holy Thing and having been communicated from it by Christ himself, goes at once to his year's duty in the orbit of the Sun God, setting sail in the sacred Ship whose symbolic origin was that of the Grail itself': *Symbolism in Mediaeval Thought*, p.434, fn.96.

romances, Galahad is the Red-Cross knight, and that his shield bearing this blazon was given to him by Christ in the guise of a white knight.¹ Only Lancelot and Guinevere remain: the Lunar Goddess and her instrument and devotee.

It only remains to say that this mythos conflates the Celtic Sun-god and Christ. Both Arthur and Christ are Sun-gods. Both are fatally wounded. Both disappear to a Paradise with the promise of their eventual return. The Grail is deliberately brought to Glastonbury, where the old religion is fused with the new, and the church housing it is dedicated to the new name of the old Lunar Goddess, Mary. The legend that Joseph had earlier brought the child Jesus to these lands is a convenient way of making this transition.

In Rossetti's pen and ink drawing of *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber*, 1857,² we may make out some of these symbolic motifs. The drawing depicts the episode in which Sir Mordred has inflamed his fellow knights against Sir Lancelot. They plan to kill him in the Queen's chamber. Sir Lancelot is shown preparing to defend himself and the Queen against their ingress. Rossetti's ink drawings have the peculiar quality of being watercolours without the colour, and this is no doubt due to his method of stippling and scratching common to both - the surface is never calm in either. The drawing is an early depiction of Jane, and although we must exercise caution in attributing any autobiographical status to this, the role she plays can only indicate the importance she already assumes for Rossetti.

Perhaps the most important feature of the drawing is the cape of feathers that the Queen is shown wearing. The cape of feathers, since prehistoric times, has been the attire of the shaman, his robe of magic. The feathers symbolically allow his soul to fly like a bird, leaving behind the weighty material body which entraps it. Cooper states, under the subsection *Celtic*, 'Feathered cloaks worn by priests represent the journey to the other world'.³ Frances Yates comments upon such magical vestments in a passage upon More's *Utopia*:

¹ Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, p.542.

² Surtees Cat. no. 95, plate 127. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

³ JC Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), under the section 'Feather'. He also states, under the sub-section *Scandinavian*, 'Freyja owned a magic robe of feathers which enabled its wearer to fly through the air', and under *Shamanistic*, 'The feathered robes of shamans give power of flight to other realms, and to undertake knowledge-gaining journeys'.

And what was the religion of the Utopians like? They had very large, dark churches, dimly lighted by tapers, into which the priests made a spectacular entry clothed in vestments of 'changeable colours' made of bird's feathers arranged in a manner which contained 'certain divine mysteries'. The dress of the Utopian priests reminded an early critic of 'conjuring garments', and there is certainly rather a strange atmosphere about the religion of More's communists.¹

Why, we may ask, has Rossetti chosen to portray Guinevere dressed in such a 'conjuring garment'? It is so strange an apparel that we must assume that it is no accident. In Wolfram's *Parzival*, certain persons throughout the story are described as wearing peacock's feathers, and this symbolically denotes that they are supernatural guides, or at least have connections with the otherworld.² In this context, we might be tempted to assume that this cloak identifies her as Freyja, the Scandinavian goddess of love, and counterpart of Venus, after whom Friday is named. Alternatively, we might assume that she has woven her spell of love around Lancelot, and that he is powerless to act otherwise. It is probably wisest to accept a combination of these ideas.

Moving on, we notice on Lancelot's cuff and bodice the solar spirals that denote his role as the solar champion of Guinevere. On the pommel of his sword is the cross-in-circle device of the Rosy-Cross. Beneath his leaning body is the tree-in-barrel symbol of the Tree of Life that Rossetti uses elsewhere (e.g. in *Lucrezia Borgia*). Although here we are unable to tell the colour of the fruit it bears, we know from other examples that they are likely to be golden - they are the golden apples (or other fruit, such as oranges) of the sun. These motifs are enough to allow us to suggest that Rossetti is again applying the symbolism of the Year King to this picture of Lancelot and Guinevere.

¹ *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.233.

² In alchemy, the 'peacocks tail' denotes that a certain stage of the process has been reached. Sometimes Lady Alchymia is depicted carrying a peacock-feather fan, or as Iris, the rainbow, with peacocks over her: see de Rola, *Alchemy*, plate 57.

In the earlier watercolour, Rossetti's first attempt at an Arthurian subject, *Arthur's Tomb (The Last Meeting of Lancelot and Guenevere)*, 1854-5¹ (Fig.30), we find essentially the same symbolism present. Rossetti was, of course, aware that Arthur had no tomb - he had been taken by the Queens to the Apple Isle of Avalon² - and with this in mind we must view this painting as being purely symbolical in content and meaning. FG Stephens confirms this, describing the painting as: 'a brilliant study of sunlight in an apple orchard, where, under the fruit-laden trees (here introduced significantly), lies the altar-tomb of King Arthur'.³

The Queen, dressed in black kneels beside the tomb of Arthur, refusing the last kiss of Lancelot. Over them spreads the Tree of life with its (barely seen) golden fruit, which casts its shadow on the scene of the appearance of the Grail at Arthur's Court, painted on the tomb. Lancelot is dressed in red and his shield bears the (again barely seen) motif of the Red Cross. The colours of these three figures are red, white, and black/white, which denotes the lunar cycle, though not in the correct order. We should note that in this painting, the new Solar King has at last replaced the old Solar King who is now dead. The colours the Queen wears are obviously those of death, and the white of her wimple edges her nun's garb like an old crescent moon (the death aspect) appearing from the darkness.⁴ This perhaps symbolises that the old order has ended. The days of the old Celtic Lunar Queen have passed, and Christianity has taken her place: she herself resides in a convent.

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 73, plate 80. British Museum.

² Rossetti depicts this scene in his design *King Arthur and the Weeping Queens*, 1856-7, for Moxon's illustrated edition of Tennyson's *Poems* (1857). Surtees Cat. no. 84, plate 110. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery. The dying King is shown lying in a circle of ten Queens. The Queen on the left has a Rose motif on her shoulder; the second left wears a sun motif and a lunar crown; a sun motif appears above the cross of the sword handle, which has a cross-in-circle on the pommel. In the original drawing, five of the Queens have the OXOXO motif on their crowns.

³ FG Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Seeley, 1894), p.40. I consider the words 'sunlight in an apple-orchard', and 'altar-tomb' to be in themselves significant here. Stephens adds in a footnote: 'While the catalogues refer to the *Morte Arthur* as the authority for the subject, I have not, although the first to describe the incident to Rossetti, been able to find anything about it in that wilderness of romance.'

⁴ Pater writes: 'The English poet [Morris] too has learned the secret. He has diffused through *King Arthur's Tomb* the maddening white glare of the sun, and tyranny of the moon, not tender and far-off, but close down - the sorcerer's moon, large and feverish. ... The influence of summer is like a poison in one's blood, with a sudden bewildered sickening of life and all things.' 'Aesthetic Poetry', in *Appreciations*, p.218. He is referring to Morris's poem, which was inspired by Rossetti's painting.

No doubt we are meant to understand that the Old Queen still exists under the guise of Christianity.¹

In December 1869, Rossetti was planning a poem to be entitled *God's Graal*. He envisaged it as 'Lancelot losing the Sangraal', 'wherein God and Guenevere will be weighed against each other by another table of weights and measures'.² In March of 1870, he again writes, rather enigmatically, 'The poem I shall do ... will be, I believe, *God's Graal* - i.e. the loss of the Sangraal by Lancelot - a theme chosen to emphasize the marked superiority of Guenevere over God'.³ This is a remarkable statement. What Rossetti may have intended by this, it is now impossible to say.⁴ In the same letter, Rossetti recounts his visit to the bookseller Molini to look at a French version of *Lancelot* dated 1533.⁵

The Llandaff Triptych.

I turn now to the Llandaff Cathedral Triptych, entitled *The Seed of David*, 1858-64⁶ (Fig.31), which, although a picture of the Adoration, also skilfully combines Biblical imagery with Arthurian content in much the same way as do the Grail romances. This is a complex picture with a dense sub-text of resonances and correspondences. It also effectively marks Rossetti's transition from the period of his small mediaeval watercolour paintings, to that of the larger, more confident oil paintings of his later career.

¹ This was indeed how Guinevere was understood by the later Aesthetes. In Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, there is a fine bronze statuette of the Queen entitled *Guinevere's Redeeming*, 1907, by the American artist William Reynolds Stevens. The most significant feature of this figure is the inclusion upon her back of the Rose-Cross. Other features make it quite clear that the Queen corresponds to the meanings I have suggested.

² *Letters*, II, 779, letter 910, to Swinburne.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.812-13, letter 941, to Swinburne.

⁴ A fragment of this poem was published in the 1911 edition of *Works* (London: Ellis), p.239, but this is far from remarkable. The fifth and last stanza reads:

Lancelot lay before the shrine;
(The apple tree's in the wood)
There was set Christ's very sign,
The bread unknown and the unknown wine
That the soul's life for a livelihood
Craves from his wheat and vine.

⁵ Doughty records in a footnote that Swinburne had seen the book and passed this information on to DGR. In the letter, DGR recounts the episode of Lancelot's first kiss with the Queen from this work.

⁶ Surtees Cat. no. 105, plates 139-147. Llandaff Cathedral.

In 1856, Rossetti was introduced by Ruskin to the architect John P Seddon, whose partner John Pritchard had been appointed to carry out the restoration of Llandaff Cathedral, near Cardiff. Seddon was responsible for the furnishing of the Cathedral, and this led to his enquiries as to whether Rossetti would be interested in undertaking the commission for a triptych for the altar. Rossetti was, needless to say, delighted at the prospect, despite his lack of technical proficiency: 'a big thing which I shall go into with a howl of delight'.¹ He submitted a price of four hundred pounds for the work, which was approved by the authorities. Rossetti describes his design:

This picture shows Christ sprung from high and low, as united in the person of David who was both Shepherd and King, and worshipped by high and low (by King and Shepherd) at his birth.

The centrepiece is not a literal reading of the event of the Nativity, but rather a condensed symbol of it.²

Compared to the manner in which he had been working during the previous years (with the exception of *Found* and the Oxford Union designs), one is immediately struck by the size of this painting. In 1856, he painted a much smaller watercolour version of this design, and this is very much rooted in the manner in which he had up to this time been working. It is essentially one of his 'mediaeval' pieces; the figures are insubstantial, ethereal, and slight; the palette is bright, and the overall effect is that of a vision. It is basically an enlarged manuscript illustration. The large oil version marks Rossetti's transition from the mediaeval into the Renaissance. The palette is deeper, darker, and richer, and the overall effect is rather oppressive and brooding by comparison. The painting as a whole (that is, the three panels), is an uneasy mix. If it were not a triptych, one would suggest that the central panel was enough in itself, as the wings tend to both detract and distract. The left-hand panel shows the boy David, who is dominant and full of vigour. In contrast, the right-hand panel shows the aged David playing on an oriental harp, but unfortunately this is not so well

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

conceived or painted, and tends to merge into its background. He appears weighed down by melancholy and depression, rather than exalted by the flight of his song. The left-hand panel dominates in its simplicity, while the right-hand panel recedes in confusion. The relative sizes of the figures across the three panels is also unsatisfactory in its overall effect.

The central panel seems unhappily caught between two imperatives, that of the poetic vision, and that of the painterly necessity to get his figures right. This is the result of Rossetti's inexperience. The painting as it is sits uncomfortably between reality and vision. Such requirements as an awareness of spatial volume and the direction of the light source(s) have also simply not been learned. Despite this, the result is still an impressive and utterly Rossettian image, which is full of the rich complexity and density - the 'condensed symbol' - of his verse.

The central panel shows the traditional manger around and within which throng a multitude of angels. A darkly tanned shepherd and a richly dressed king kneel before the King of Heaven, who is held by Mary. The king kisses the feet of Christ and lays down his crown for the child. It will be noticed that the king is dressed in red, and has on his back a circular golden shield.¹ Behind the shield is a great arrow with golden flights, which points downwards. I interpret this figure of the king as representing the old Sun-king of the dying year, who is handing over his crown to the new Sun-king of the new solar year, who is Christ, born at the Winter solstice. It may also represent the passing of the pagan Arthurian order to be replaced by the Christian, noted earlier. In Rossettian symbolism, male figures dressed in red almost invariably represent the Sun-god. Here, he is shown in the solar colours of red and gold, and the disc of his shield represents the sun.² The arrow behind the shield is also an ancient symbol of solar rays, and pointing down, as it does here, symbolises decline and death. The figures of David in the wings expand on this theme; young, vigorous David is in the ascendant, with an array of lances pointing skyward behind him, likewise symbolic of solar rays, while old King David, on the right is slumped and weary in the sunset of his years. In the central panel, the birth of Christ represents the dawn

¹ It cannot be made out with any certainty what design the shield bears; it appears to consist of two figures, one of whom is possibly transfixing the other with a spear or lance.

² Watts-Dunton uses this same imagery in a poem entitled *The Vision*, to preface *Aylwin* (p.viii): 'While, rising red and kindling every billow, / The sun's shield shines 'neath many a golden spear'.

of a new age. Rossetti's representation of the young David may well have been inspired by the solar-imagery in Blake's fragment, *Day*, in the notebook he had acquired from Samuel Palmer's brother on 30th April 1847:¹

The Sun arises in the East,
Cloth'd in robes of blood & gold;
Swords & spears, & wrath increast,
All around his bosom roll'd,
Crown'd with warlike fires & raging desires.²

Mary, who is dressed in the traditional blue robes of the Queen of Heaven, echoes the circular motif of the king's sun-shield with the white circular motif on her shoulder. This is a lunar symbol, which shows the triple-aspect of her divinity: she represents the old Triple-lunar Goddess in new guise. We are now able to see that this painting fully conforms to Rossetti's pattern of Solar-Lunar symbolism: the old Solar-king, who is in decline; the Triple-lunar Goddess, who is his consort and the Mother of All Living; and the new King, the child of their union, who is in the ascendant, and will take his place. Beneath her blue cloak of the heavens, Mary wears a green gown, as do most of Rossetti's goddess figures, to show the resurrection and regeneration of vegetative Nature, the Spirit of Vegetation, whom the sacred child represents.³

But, most importantly, this is a Rosicrucian image. The symbol on the shoulders of the angels leaves us in no doubt of this - it is the Rosy-Cross. It is most clearly seen on the shoulder of the angel on the left (Figs.32 & 33). It is shown consisting of a white square, upon which is the equal-armed cross of St George. In the centre of this cross is a heart,

¹ This is now known as the 'Rossetti' M.S.

² Blake, *Poems and Prophecies*, p.382.

³ Waite regards the 'Lost Word' of Masonry as corresponding to the now lost 'Secret Words' of Christ that accompanied the Grail. Here, his words illuminate Rossetti's image and its meaning; 'As regards the Lost Word, it is explained that the sun at autumn has lost its power and Nature is rendered mute, but the star of day at the springtide resumes its vital force, and this is the recovery of the Word, when Nature, with all her voices, speaks and sings, even as the Sons of God shouted for joy in the perfect morning of the cosmos': *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, p.430. This well illustrates the underlying theme behind all we have been examining. He also states that the initials I.N.R.I. nailed to the cross of Christ were understood by Hermeticists as standing for *Ignis Natura Renovatur Integra*, 'All Nature is renewed by fire'.

from which spring four roses, one to each of the white quadrants. On the wings of the angel can be seen at the top a blazing heart, below which is a rather indeterminate mass of what appear to be red roses. In the right hand of Christ, which the shepherd is kissing, is a very indistinct rose, or bunch of roses, the stem of which runs along his arm. The arm of Christ, and the stem of the rose, are held in Mary's hand, and the end of the stem originates from the visible square of white that is the swaddling clothes around Christ's chest,¹ thus paralleling the insignia on the arms of the angels. This, however, remains ambiguous due to the excessively heavy shadow along Christ's arm. There is a touch of subtlety here, also: Surtees offers the suggestion that the face of the shepherd who is kissing the hand of Christ may have been modelled from Burne-Jones; if this is so, he appears to be kissing the rose also, which is significant as this flower often appears in the symbolism of his own work. It is also perhaps significant that Rossetti chose Jane, and not Elizabeth, as the model for the Virgin. Originally the model for the head of Mary had been Ruth Herbert, but that of Jane was substituted sometime around 1861. As the mother of God, Mary is symbolically the Vessel of the Holy Grail.

Turning to the panel on the right, we notice the peacock below King David. In this context, the peacock does not represent vanity, stupidity, and pride, which are its modern connotations. Here, it stands for resurrection and rebirth, because each year the bird moults its feathers and grows them anew. It has many of the associations attributed to the phoenix, thus representing solar immortality. This bird often appears in Renaissance paintings of the Nativity. In a Christian sense, it stands for the reborn Christ and his eventual resurrection. Being a solar symbol, it stands for the divine love the sun has for the earth, bringing life and fertility to the land, and thus to man also. In Rosicrucian symbolism, the peacock represents a stage of the alchemical process. Its multi-coloured tail feathers also have a similar meaning to that of the rainbow: from God, who is the unity of pure light, the multiplicity of the universe occurs as a refraction of light through matter, symbolised by the many colours.² Mythologically, the peacock is associated with the sacred Tree, which can be

¹ That this originates from Christ's chest is an important motif, as it indicates that the Rose springs directly from, and is symbolic of, the heart of Christ.

² Goethe, who was deeply interested in alchemy, formulated his colour theory to explain how pure white light assumes a deeper colour as it passes through denser, that is, less pure matter on its way to the eye. In

seen in this painting, both on the sur-coat of King David, and in the orange tree behind him, whose fruits represent the sun, as we have seen before. Red and gold are the predominant colours of this panel, and these are the colours of the sun, alchemical sulphur and gold.

More detail may be found in the embroidery on the sur-coat of King David. It will be seen that on the portion visible below his left arm, a gold cross divides the front panel into four compartments. This cross is decorated with Rossetti's simple 'Rosicrucian' motif of circle and saltire, OXOXO. In each of the bottom two panels is depicted a stylised tree which has growing at its base a lily and a rose, one on either side. The trees are crowned with gold rays and bear abundant gold fruit. They are the Tree of Life, and in this context may also denote the Royal line of Sun-kings of Judah, of which Jesus will be the ultimate and supreme example.¹ We are unable to make out the content of the two panels above these. Surmounting the four panels divided by the gold cross, and only partly visible, is a smaller top panel which is full of roses. This combination of symbols represents the *Rosae et Aureae Crucis* of the Rosicrucians. The oriental harp upon which the King plays, besides being an allusion to the Psalms, also refers to the Rosicrucian belief that colour (as in the peacock's tail) and music are closely allied as the resonances of the universal harmony. Here they both stem from the symbolic source of the Sun-king, as in the print of Gafurius, discussed earlier. Thus here, David equates with Apollo.

As we look at these images, perhaps with the exception of the left-hand panel of the boy David, what strikes us is that we are not looking at an Eastern scene, but an odd admixture of Oriental and Arthurian, such as exists in the Grail romances. The figure of the King is as much, if not more, Arthur than David.

That this painting is partly an Arthurian image is no mere whim on the part of Rossetti; it is part of the very rich symbolism of the painting. The title *The Seed of David*, applies as much to Galahad as it does to Christ.² The choice of King David in the Triptych has much to do with the Welsh location of the Cathedral itself, David being the Patron Saint of

Rosicrucian terms, the rainbow is a refraction of pure light, which symbolises God, through water, which symbolises matter, or the feminine principle.

¹ In the Grail legends, Galahad is the last of this line.

² "King Arthur, I bring you the Desired Knight, he who stems from the noble house of King David and the lineage of Joseph of Arimathea": *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, p.37.

Wales.¹ But it is the Celtic past, both historically and mythologically, that accounts for the admixture of oriental and Arthurian influences within the painting.

Llandaff Cathedral has very strong Arthurian connections. The Cathedral records date back to the Dark Ages when the Cathedral was founded, the most important of which is the *Liber Landavensis*, or the *Ancient Register of the Cathedral Church of Llandaff*. This was translated from the Latin by the Reverend William Jenkins Rees, in 1839. The original Church was built by the Celtic Saint Teilo on a site founded and occupied by St. Dyfrig, or Dubricius.

St Dubricius was a very prominent figure in the sixth century. He was a contemporary of the fabled Aurelius Ambrosius, Merlin, Uther Pendragon, and King Arthur.² It was Aurelius who established him as the Archbishop of the City of the Legions (Caerusk), thus making him one of the most influential men in Britain.³ He was also Bishop of Llandaff. According to the *Life of St Dyfrig* contained in the *Book of Llandaff*, it was he who had set the crown on the head of King Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth records the event:

Dubricius lamented the sad state of his country. He called the other bishops to him and bestowed the crown of the kingdom upon Arthur. Arthur was a young man only fifteen years old; but he was of outstanding courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all the people.⁴

The *Brut Tysilio* confirms that this took place at Caer Vudei, or 'the camp in the wood'.

¹ St David was himself traditionally connected with Glastonbury and the Grail legends. Like Lancelot and Galahad, St David was held to be of the lineage of Our Lady. He is supposed to have built the first church at Glastonbury, been a hereditary guardian of the Grail, given the Mass to Britain, and to have been consecrated by Christ himself. St David is said to have brought a miraculous altar, which was the sepulchre of Christ, to Britain. There seems in this to be some conflation with the traditions surrounding Joseph of Arimathea. See Waite, *Hidden Church*, pp.333, 335, 438, 444, and 446. Also Anderson, *The Ancient Secret*, pp.26 and 81.

² So prominent a figure was Dubricius that he is sometimes conflated with Merlin: 'This may well have been why his name and that of Merlin, 'the Wise One', seem to have become entangled in many instances.' Andere, *Arthurian Links with Herefordshire*, p.40.

³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1966), p.198.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.212. The act of crowning the new Sun-king (Arthur by Dubricius) is reflected in Rossetti's painting. Geoffrey states that the leaders of the Britons 'suggested to Dubricius ... that as their King he should crown Arthur, the son of Uther': *ibid*.

Before the Battle of Bath, Dubricius made a rallying address to Arthur's troops, who then went on to win the day.¹ After a distinguished religious career, he resigned as Archbishop to become a hermit; his position at the City of the Legions was taken by David, the uncle of Arthur, and his primacy at Llandaff was taken by St Teilo. Dubricius's bones were later returned to Llandaff, where they were re-interred in the St Dyfrig chapel of the Cathedral.

Another saint to be closely associated with Llandaff, 'Probably the most important soldier saint of Arthur's time was Iltyd Farchog ('The Golden Chained Knight'). ... Iltyd and Arthur were first cousins'.² Rossetti's triptych is now on display in the St Iltyd Chapel of the Cathedral.

It is worth noting that there are two more aspects important to Rosicrucianism connected with Rossetti's painting and its Arthurian connotations. Firstly, in his description of the painting, he is eager to stress the equality of man before Christ, whether he be shepherd or king. Secondly, King David, King Arthur, St David, and the saints associated with the Cathedral, all have one thing in common - each one was personally involved in the fight for national independence and freedom.³ St Dyfrig's Chapel is now a Masonic chapel, and was restored by donations from that organisation.

St George.

We must consider Rossetti's portrayal of St George as a development of the Grail myths interpreted through another solar hero. In many respects, Rossetti treats St George as a variation of King Arthur.

¹ Ibid, p.216. Geoffrey of Monmouth notes that in this battle, Arthur had 'across his shoulders a circular shield called Pridwen, on which there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, which forced him to be thinking perpetually of her': p.217.

² Chris Barber and David Pykitt, *Journey to Avalon: The Final Discovery of King Arthur* (Abergavenny, Gwent: Bloreng, 1993), p.74. This book contains a wealth of information on the genealogy of Arthur and the hierarchy of the Welsh Celtic Saints. According to their genealogy on p. 174, Dubricius was distantly related to Arthur. See also Andere, *Arthurian Links with Herefordshire*, p.38

³ Barber and Pykitt note the importance of St David's role as a soldier-saint: 'He is thus shown as a typical figure of the British Heroic Age, comparable with Arthur himself. ... In later years it was this image of David as a patriotic leader which helped to ensure his recognition as Patron Saint of Wales.' Ibid, p.85.

The painting *The Wedding of St George and the Princess Sabra*, 1857¹ (Fig.34), must rate as one of the masterpieces of Rossetti's watercolour period. This is Rossettian imagery at its best, and this despite the painterly defects that in a lesser artist would have led to disaster. Rossetti actually *utilises* these defects, whether conscious of the fact or not, to produce the image he requires, thus flying in the face of the established artistic practices of his time. The combination of subject, image, and technique *should* produce a painting of the most appalling naivety, but does not; it produces precisely the opposite, a literal gem of a painting. This is no mean accomplishment.

The composition of the painting is interesting; the dominant red and gold figure of St George creates both a triangular structure and a diagonal that bisects the square of the image area from the bottom left-hand corner to the top right-hand corner. The figure of St George rises as a series of steps along this diagonal. At the same time, parts of St George recede from this structure almost to the point of disappearance: although the design is essentially two dimensional, spatial qualities are unintentionally forced on the eye through the effects of colour intensity in a somewhat disturbing way, and this is the result of Rossetti's lack of training.

St George is depicted as a solar hero, dressed in red and gold, with sun-ray spurs, and a solar motif pierced into his golden helm. Behind his head is a sun-disc nimbus, and his hair seems to curl up like flames along the hair-line. The decoration along the bottom hem of his sur-coat consists of alternating vertical golden crosses within lozenges, and diagonal crosses within circles.

The Princess, who reclines against him following the line of his diagonal, wears a red dress with white trimming, and she is shown cutting a lock of her black hair which she has wound through the crest of his golden helm. These three colours, white, red, and black, are the traditional colours of the moon, which suggests that she represents the lunar deity to his sun. The chair, from which she has slipped, proclaims her royal status by the motif of her crown in an admixture of blue and green; the seat is likewise in these colours, and on it sit a comb and hair brush. The colour of the seat and crown motif suggests both sea and vegetation, both the province of the Lunar-goddess, while the hair-combing instruments are

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 97, plate 132. Tate Gallery.

usually an attribute of Venus (along with the mirror, which we do not see here). This is confirmed by further symbols in the background, which have been borrowed from the woodcuts of Durer.¹ In the upper right hand side of the painting can be seen a copper sphere with a semi-circular basin below it; the tap of the sphere is a silver crescent. In the upper left-hand side, opposite, can be seen a whisk and a towel. These are sophisticated symbols of the Moon-goddess. The sphere is the most perfect of volumetric shapes, and, as a circle in three dimensions, it represents the material universe in general, and our world in particular. Alchemically, copper is the metal of Venus, because it is red in colour (the symbolic colour of Venus) and when it tarnishes, it takes a surface patina of green, which represents vegetation. This explains why all Rossetti's goddess figures have copper-coloured hair and wear green dresses. The silver crescent of the tap represents the lunar aspect of Venus, and also the fact that the moon rules over water. The semi-circular bowl of water beneath reflects this. The whisk is also a symbol of Venus (perhaps because she can whip up water into waves?), as is the towel, for she is a pure goddess, and one must also purify oneself before approaching her. These items are those utilised in ritual purification. The same symbols appear in *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*,² the drawing *Mariana in the South*,³ and *La Bella Mano*,⁴ in which Venus is shown washing her hands in the scallop-shell basin, and an angel holds the towel for her to dry herself with. It also appears in the study for *Washing Hands*.⁵

The back of the chair is gold against which is a chevron of red on which are alternating motifs of white lilies, and a black cross with black rays around its bottom. There appears to be some similarity between this last motif and that noted on the sur-coat of Sir Galahad in *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors, and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael*, and I cautiously suggest that it may here stand for the death of vegetation. If this is the case, it

¹ TD Barlow, *Woodcuts of Albrecht Durer* (London: Penguin, 1948). The water-globe and basin appear in *St Jerome and the Lion* (plate 1), and the globe, basin, and whisk can be seen in *The Life of the Virgin: The Birth of the Virgin* (plate 38) (Fig.35).

² Surtees Cat. no. 58, plate 51. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 86, plate 112. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 240, plate 341. Bancroft Collection, Wilmington Society of Fine Arts, Delaware.

⁵ Surtees Cat. no. 179 A, plate 260. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

would indicate that the Princess here represents Proserpine.¹ These motifs are repeated on the outside of both chairs, set against alternating bands of blue and green. A variation on these motifs appears in *A Christmas Carol*, 1857-8.² The gold of the chairs, and their royal nature, indicate that they are the seats of deities in a mythological and alchemical sense.

We are told by the title of the painting that it represents a wedding; we understand symbolically that St George as the Sun-god is embracing the Princess as the Lunar-goddess, and this forms a diagonal across the picture area. The prominent device St George is wearing on his shoulder seems to echo this conjunction. It is square in shape, is divided diagonally from corner to corner, and shows a dragon in a black and white counterchange along the diagonal. This is the central motif of the whole painting, and represents the union of opposites; the sacred marriage of darkness and light. The Rosicrucian alchemist Thomas Vaughan describes just this:

I am the old Dragon that is present everywhere on the face of the Earth, - father and mother, youthful and antique, weak yet powerful, visible and invisible, hard and soft, descending to the earth and ascending to the heavens, most high and most low - in me the order of nature is oftentimes inverted - I am dark and bright; I spring from the earth and I come out of heaven. I am well known yet a mere nothing.³

The death of the dragon, that is the conquering of the lower animal nature, has allowed this union to take place. The dragon may thus be seen to correspond to the lower state of the passionate nature in man, 'the impetuosity and violence of passion' noted earlier; that is 'the volatile', which must first be subdued and conquered in the individual; that is, 'fixed'.⁴ The Hermeticists often used the symbol of the crucified snake to represent this notion. In

¹ It will be noted that in the painting mentioned, Sir Galahad wears the motif in healthy green, denoting the full vitality of vegetation; whereas in this painting it appears as skeletal black.

² Surtees Cat. no. 98, plate 134. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

³ Frederick Carter, *The Dragon of the Alchemists* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1926), p.43. The Dragon represents the *prima materia*, and this seems to be what he is here describing; that is, Man (in a mystical, not a chemical sense).

⁴ This is shown in plate 14, de Rola, *Alchemy: The Secret Art*, where the Sun and Moon dressed as knights 'fix' the 'volatile' green dragon.

Mediaeval texts, the words serpent, worm, and dragon are interchangeable. The colour symbolism employed throughout this painting suggests alchemical symbolism.

Besides denoting the lower animal self, the dragon may perhaps also here represent the forces of the Spirit of Nature itself; that is, the Serpent. Is this why the Princess looks so sorrowful, and the ambience of the painting as a whole is downcast rather than joyful? Mythologically, the dragon (as serpent) guards the sacred Tree of Life, presided over by the Goddess. Here, the dragon has been defeated by the Solar-god, and we might read into this the transition from a Lunar Goddess orientated religion to that of a patriarchal solar dominated religion (such as Christianity). We may say that St George has conquered not only the dragon, but the princess also: he retains his throne while she has been de-throned in order to embrace him. However, as the serpent (or dragon) also stands for the Spirit of Nature, we may also understand this as a symbol of the succession of the Year King.¹ Whichever, the Princess appears to be mourning the death of the dragon, who is, after all, her partner. So close is this relationship, that the dragon and the Princess may even be regarded as in some sense the same, as Carter relates: 'In the fairy tales the beast, the dragon, the terrible monster, is the disguise of the beloved; the horror to be overcome itself is, or contains, the reward. Beauty and the beast must be conjoined'.² This of course is the alchemical concept of the union of opposites in another guise. Here, St George has now taken the place of the dragon, and is rewarded with the Princess.

St George has triumphed over his adversary, and taken the Princess in marriage. In alchemical terms, this is a marriage, or union, of two (opposing) principles. The throne, in alchemical illustrations, is the seat or chair of the deity, which represents a principle. We could also say that the Christian sun-symbol of St George is embracing the Princess who is the pagan lunar-symbol of the older religions, in a sacred marriage of the two into one unifying universal religion. The steps formed by the body of St George along the diagonal

¹ A similar situation pertains in classical mythology when Heracles, a solar deity, kills the serpent Ladon who guards the Tree in the Garden of the Hesperides, in order that he might obtain the golden apples. Graves, in *Greek Myths*, p.513, sees this as a ritual of the succession of the sacred Kingship: 'The Garden of the three Hesperides - whose names identify them with the sunset ... - is placed in the Far West because the sunset was a symbol of the sacred king's death. Heracles received the apples at the close of his reign'. These were handed to him by the Triple-goddess 'as his passport to Paradise'.

² *The Dragon of the Alchemists*, p.50. He also states here, 'The serpent secret is the reconquest of the lost garden of simplicity'.

may be interpreted as the steps of the Work, and the colours red and gold denote that the Work has been achieved in the sacred marriage - that is, the Chemical Wedding.¹ To support this argument, I turn to the painting *Dantis Amor*² (Fig.36). Here we have a similar square shaped picture area dominated by the same bottom-left to top-right diagonal. Here, also, we have the symbolic union of the Sun and Moon in the persons of Christ and Beatrice. Here, the central unifying figure is Love, Amor, whom we may also interpret in alchemical terms as hermaphroditic Mercurius. We should note that the red wings of Love form the red saltire of the Rosy-Cross. This painting illustrates that it is Love that is the motivating and unifying force which operates throughout and informs the whole material universe, for written along the diagonal of the study, are Dante's words 'L'Amor che muove il sol, e l'altre stelle' ('The Love which moves the sun and other stars.') - the last line of the *Divine Comedy*. Thus it is through the medium of Love that the Sacred Marriage³ of the universal opposites, symbolised by the Sun (Christ) and Moon (Beatrice), can take place. Both Christ and Beatrice are shown occupying triangular spaces, each representing a trinity, and these are combined to form a stable square by the unifying figure of Love.⁴ If we interpret Love as Hermetic Mercury, he is the agent by which the Great Work is accomplished. Here he is depicted as the androgynous child, the sum of the union of opposites of Sol and Luna. He represents both the agent and the product of the Work simultaneously, that is, the alpha and omega. This is a typical characteristic of the Philosopher's Stone, which is often stated to be Christ or Mercurius. Indeed, the symbols of alpha and omega appear alternately with those of a golden cross on the crown of Christ in the painting. This, Rossetti's most overtly alchemical emblem, is entirely in character with those of an earlier period, and yet at the same time, is completely original in design.

¹ An interesting illustration showing the Work in the form of a Knight, with the relevant colours displayed in his armour, may be seen in de Rola, *Alchemy: The Secret Art*, plate 18.

² Surtees Cat. no. 117, plates 179 and 181. Tate Gallery.

³ In this context, the term relates specifically to mystical alchemy, as in *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*.

⁴ In alchemical symbolism, the square represents the four elements, and the triangle, the *tria prima* from which the Work is produced. These are the Solar King, or sophic sulphur, which represents the Soul, the Lunar Queen, or sophic mercury, which represents the Spirit, and salt, which represents the Body. These are the basic building blocks of alchemical theory. Paracelsus stated: 'the soul, which indeed is Sulphur ... unites those two contraries, the body and the spirit, and changes them into one essence': Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p.27. This union of body and spirit is a dominant theme within Rossetti's poetry.

A possible source for Rossetti's 'geometrical alchemy' is the Rosicrucian apologist Michael Maier's work *Atalanta Fugiens*, Oppenheim, 1618. Emblem XXI of this work depicts a geometrical representation of alchemical theory.¹ This shows a male and female figure (the masculine and feminine principles operating in Nature) within a circle, square, and triangle, and concerns the making of the Philosopher's Stone. This is referred to again in his discourse on Emblem XXXIX: 'For the square, or four elements, must first of all be considered. From this we come to the hemisphere [semi-circle], with its two lines, the straight and the curved, in other words the white moon; and then to the triangle, composed of body, spirit and soul, or sun, moon and mercury. Wherefore Rhazes in his Epistle says *The Stone is triangular in essence, square in quality*'.²

One symbol that appears to be absent from *The Wedding of St George and the Princess Sabra*, is that of the Rose-Cross. But this is obliquely referred to by the figure of St George himself. He symbolises the Rose Red Cross. And behind the Princess and St George is a rose-hedge. In fact, the whole image may be understood as a representation of the Rose-Cross. The Rose-Cross does actually appear in the background, on the wings of the angels. Here we can make out the red saltire on a blue background on the green wings; red for spirit, blue for matter, green for vegetation. Once again, Rossetti has taken pains to place the symbol in a position where it is not at all obvious. The angels also wear white ribbons 'crossways' with red decorations on them. The bells which the angels are ringing produce the harmony of the heavenly spheres. The bells pass directly behind the sun-halo of the saint, and if we count them, including the unseen intervals behind the nimbus, we find that there are eight. The support from which they hang is inclined, and I suggest that they stand for the planetary spheres of mediaeval cosmology.³ The chimes are the harmony of the

¹ Reproduced in Read, plate 46.

² Ibid, pp.242-3. Author's parentheses, original italics. The passage quoted is Maier's interpretation of that part of the Oedipus legend which concerns the answer to the Sphinx's riddle: 'some make it signify the life of man, and they are wrong'. Maier's emblem shows a child on all fours with a square on its forehead, an adult standing on two legs emblazoned with a semi-circle, and an old man with his stick ensigned with a triangle. Rossetti produced a drawing on this theme, entitled *The Question*, 1875, and also two sonnets, shortly before he died. Surtees Cat. no. 241, plate 350. Maier employs the symbolism of Oedipus to illustrate the slaying of the Old King (gold) and his replacement by the New King, 'his son' (mercury), thus perpetuating the fertility myth in an alchemical context: 'the first efficient cause, that is, the father, is put out of the way and routed by its own effect, that is, its son': Read, p.243.

³ That is, the seven planetary spheres plus the sphere of the fixed stars. If we include the nimbus of St George in this number, and count it as the sun-disc, the number is then increased to nine - the sacred Nine

universe which celebrate the universal perfection brought about by the Sacred Marriage, 'the music of the spheres'. Shown hanging above these, in the top centre of the picture, is the crown of the Princess. A similar crown is shown hanging up in *Sir Lancelot in the Queen's Chamber*. This represents the circle of the heavens, and is intimately linked with the dragon. It will be noted that the crown has four points, and these represent the four quarters of the solar year - the crown is itself a sun symbol. In ancient astronomy, as well as astrology, the dragon was vital in determining the equinoxes and solstices - in fact the dragon is a symbol of Time. In conjunction with the sun and moon, the constellation of Draco, the Dragon, is the very measure of Time itself. In the Cabalistic *Sepher Yetzirah*, the *Book of Creation*, it is written:

The Celestial Dragon is placed over the Universe like a king upon a throne; the revolution of the year is as a king over his dominion; the heart of man is as a king in warfare.¹

The constellation of Draco is wrapped around the fixed Pole Star, so that it turns with the heavens above the earth:

as Spring passed, its head reached the zenith at midnight. So again, as it is East, North, West, or South of the Polestar, it tells at its hour the season of the year and, therefore, was the image in heaven most readily revealing the four visible, sensible, and most apparent phases, to man, of the annual life; that life of change, death, and renewal, upon which his own existence depended.²

of the material universe - that is, the seven spheres of the planets (the sun was counted as a planet), the sphere of the fixed stars, plus the Primum Mobile. In Fludd's Rosicrucian system, there were nine orders of angels above this, and each of these units contribute to the harmony of the universe ('the music of the spheres'), as if different notes (of the 'Monochord'). In the painting, the angelic chimes illustrate this.

¹ Carter, p.43.

² Ibid, p.44.

Draco thus assumes the symbolism of the Ouroboros, the Alpha and Omega, which Rossetti places on one side of the Coin of *The Sonnet*. But perhaps more importantly, it determined the Great Cross of the heavens:

the constellation Draco, which lies at the centre of the four royal signs of the quarters of the heavens ... is the guardian symbol of the North. Upon the midnight of the ancient season of the Vernal Equinox, this golden dragon hung in the zenith on the south side of the polestar, with head to east and tail to west, as if it were coiled upon the arms of the cosmic cross of the heavens. ...

The Golden Dragon, the great one of the North, is the figure in the midst of that mighty cosmic dance, which is the sacred ritual procession of the twelve circling signs of the Zodiac.¹

Above, in the height of the arched skies, is the golden Draco in the midst of the great cross of East, West, North, and South.²

In effect, the dragon that St George has killed is Lower Nature, which has in turn been raised to the heavens as Nature Perfected, or Nature Spiritualised, in Draco, the very essence of Universal Nature. This is symbolised by the two crowns; the blue/green one on the throne of the Princess, and the golden one hanging above. The golden four tined crown of the Princess is the precise symbol of the golden cosmic dragon, the four quarters of which also form the symbol of the universal Rose Cross.

Rossetti pictures the same solar-hero and lunar-heroine again in *Saint George and Princess Sabra*, 1862³ (Fig.37). In this painting the Rosicrucian symbols are more obviously present, although, once again, while they are in plain view, they are not easy to make out. The most obvious to be seen are on the banding of St George's rich gold surcoat, which bears the now familiar 'simple' device OXOXO in red upon a white ground. This coat is very similar to that worn by King David in the Llandaff Triptych, though

¹ Ibid, p.47.

² Ibid, p.48.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 151, plate 219. Tate Gallery.

without the elaborately embroidered front panels. The Princess also wears a green dress with a triple-dot motif that is very like that of the angel (also with green wings) in Brown's *Our Ladye of Good Children / Our Ladye of Saturday Night*. We may also note that both the angel and the Princess are shown in similar poses holding a vessel of water for an act of purification. The vessel in the case of *St George and Princess Sabra*, is the inverted helmet of St George, which bears an outlandish crest of a great bird.

In the background behind the two figures, the wall is decorated with a diagonal lattice in red, and in the lozenges thus formed are depicted red roses in the form of flower and two leaves. The compound motif thus consists of multiples of a red saltire with a red rose emblem in each quarter. This design is identical to that shown on the dress of Mary Magdalene in the drawing *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*.¹ Interspersed across this design in *St George*, is the motif of the Tree of Life.

Mary Magdalene.

I include in this mediaeval section Rossetti's detailed and significant drawing of *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* (Fig.38). While the subject is obviously not a mediaeval theme, I include it here because Rossetti's treatment depicts a European scene of the Middle Ages or Renaissance rather than one drawn from the Bible. I also include it for its Rosicrucian symbolism. First, we should examine the sonnet Rossetti wrote for this drawing:

‘Why wilt thou cast the roses from thine hair?
 Nay, be thou all a rose, - wreath, lips, and cheek.
 Nay, not this house, - that banquet-house we seek;
 See how they kiss and enter; come thou there.
 This delicate day of love we two will share
 Till at our ear love's whispering night shall speak.

¹ See Fig.39 and Faxon, p.84, for *St George*.

What, sweet one, - hold'st thou still the foolish freak?
Nay, when I kiss thy feet they'll leave the stair.'

'Oh loose me! Seest thou not my Bridegroom's face
That draws me to Him? For His feet my kiss,
My hair, my tears He craves to-day: - and oh!
What words can tell what other day and place
Shall see me clasp those blood-stained feet of His?
He needs me, calls me, loves me: let me go!'

This drawing is a complex allegorical image, and Mary's use in the sestet of the word 'Bridegroom' places the theme ultimately with those we have been examining above: it is around this word (in the mystical alchemical sense), that the drawing revolves. This, I think, is why the scene appears to be more appropriate to Dante's Florence than to Biblical Palestine.

The drawing is divided into two halves by the central figures: on the left a noisy procession or pageant proceeds to the 'banquet house' to celebrate perhaps a wedding or some public festival. We might infer from the words 'this delicate day of love', that this is perhaps a feast-day dedicated to Venus. Both men and women have garlands of flowers in their hair, which we are told, are roses. Mary is shown pulling these from her hair as she steps towards Christ, whom she has glimpsed in Simon's house. The right hand side of the drawing contrasts the left in its dignified calm. As Mary mounts the steps, she is being restrained by two figures, one of whom addresses her in the words of the octave of the sonnet.

The division of the painting into two halves is an illustration of the two types of love as described by Plato. On the left is portrayed a celebration of the lower Aphrodite; that is, earthly love. On the right is shown higher love; that is, spiritual love, and here the radiant features of Christ replace Plato's higher Aphrodite. Mary is the very symbol of Venus as Rosa Mundi; 'be thou all a rose, - wreath, lips, and cheek'.¹ In fact one could argue that

¹ We are reminded of Rossetti's drawing *The Roseleaf*.

she is playing the figure of Venus in this pageant as she is wearing a dress decorated with roses, and wears roses in her hair. The pattern on her dress is the same Rosicrucian motif described above on the wall behind St George, although it is seen more clearly here; a lattice composed of linked saltire crosses, between each of the quarters of which is the Rosicrucian rose in the shape of the symbol for Venus; that is, a circular flower head from which depends a stalk intersected by two leaves, which forms the shape of an equal-armed cross (Fig.39). We can make out, also, that the heads of the roses are divided by a further saltire. In addition to this, on the band beneath her breasts and round her shoulders is the 'simple' Rosicrucian motif OXOXO. This also appears on the band around the waist and hips of the girl on the left. Just below this figure is a small girl handing her a bouquet, and we note that this child is wearing the Rosicrucian ribbons tied 'crossways' over her white tunic. The Rosicrucian motifs thus seem dedicated, in particular, to the figure of Mary as Rosa Mundi.

On the right, we see the profile of the head of Christ in the square-shaped window which replicates the entire picture area. The head of Christ is radiant with light, and he may be read as the sun, in exactly the same way in which he is depicted in *Dantis Amor*. It will be noted that, again, this painting conforms to the same square shape as *Dantis Amor*, and *The Wedding of St George and the Princess Sabra*. If we look closely, we may also determine that this picture is also divided along a diagonal in a similar way, which runs from bottom right to top left; this follows the implied line of perspective along the street. I have already stated that the word 'Bridegroom' spoken by Mary also places this image as that of a wedding alongside those others we have examined. We may further understand that, as Mary represents Venus, who is lunar, and Christ is shown as the radiant solar-deity, this picture also expresses the theme of the Sacred Marriage of the union of opposites, that we are by now familiar with. Beneath the head of Christ is shown a vine, which indicates not only his sacred line, but also his function as the Spirit of Vegetation. From this a white deer is shown browsing. This is a pun on the Sacred Heart. More importantly, in the Song of Solomon, which also celebrates the theme of the Sacred Marriage, we find the lines:

My beloved is like a roe or a young hart:

Behold, he standeth behind our wall,
He looketh forth at the windows,
Showing himself through the lattice.¹

In order to reach Christ, Mary is shown mounting four steps, which she must climb before the Marriage is able to take place. These steps may be understood either as the four major steps of mystic alchemy, or the four steps of the Pythagorean Tetractys as utilised by Plato in his model of the universe. In Platonic terms these are (from the bottom), 1) the material world; 2) the universal, or world, soul; 3) the universal, or angelic, mind, and; 4) the unity that is God.² Mary has one foot on the top step. Bordering the door which she must enter are two barrels which have four bands around them: these contain the black soil of the Prima Materia from which stem two plants; on the left a lily, representing the moon, and on the right, a sunflower, representing the sun. The symbolism is perfectly captured in these words by Giordano Bruno:

Thus one should think of Sol as being in a crocus, a daffodil, a sunflower, in the cock [at the bottom of the steps], in the lion... For as the divinity descends in a certain manner inasmuch as it communicates itself to nature, so there is an ascent made to the divinity through nature. Thus through the light which shines in natural things one mounts up to the life which presides over them... Whence with magical and divine rites they ascended to the height of the divinity by that same scale of nature by which the divinity descends to the smallest things by the communication of itself.³

¹ Song of Solomon, 2.8-9. This image may be interpreted as a metaphor for the sun, as in Rossetti's drawing. 2.4-5 reads:

He brought me to the banqueting house,
And his banner over me was love.
Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples.

Chapter two opens with the Rosicrucian emblems of the Lily and Rose: 'I am the rose of Sharon, / And the lily of the valleys'. The subject of Rossetti's picture seems perhaps more appropriate to the Song of Songs than to Luke's Mary Magdalene (he does not actually identify her by name).

² These are sometimes otherwise described as 1) the elemental world, 2) the celestial world, 3) the intellectual world, and 4) the Archetypal world of God, *nous*.

³ Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 211-2. The quotation is from his *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, 1584.

This house is the house of the universal dualities, the symbolic Sun and Moon, or Christ and Venus, here in the form of Mary. One large and several small saltire crosses will be noticed through the door. This door, as the picture's title implies, is an important motif. We note that an implied cross is formed through this threshold, which has its centre in the central void of the opening. On each side of the opening is a niche containing the lily and the sunflower; this forms one axis *across* the door. At right-angles to this are the heads of Mary and Christ (who are symbolised by these plants as sun and moon), who, as it were, form a living axis *through* the door. It is this opening itself which both stresses the opposites at the same time as separating them; pictorially they are held in a state of constant poise and perfect balance. The central void of this door forms the invisible vertical axis around which they revolve, and this axis is that which unites heaven and earth. Mythologically, this is known as the *omphalos*, the navel of the world, or world centre, the sacred place about which both earth and the heavens revolve.

Hanging from Mary's waist is a sphere, and below it a 'tail' that I am unable to decipher. In the Bible, Mary carries 'an alabaster box of ointment';¹ here Rossetti has chosen to depict it as a sphere. In a later painting, *Mary Magdalene*, 1877,² Mary is shown holding the same object to her chest.³ Around the head of Mary are eight star-like white blooms. The painting is in chiaroscuro, with the box, as well as the hand and face of Mary, brightly lit against a deeply shadowed background. In the gloom, which reminds us of the dark of the heavens or the depths of the sea, the box glows like a pearl. This is significant, because it simultaneously represents both the moon and a pearl. We are meant to understand that Mary ('Sea') and the pearl / moon are one and the same. Cooper⁴ lists some interesting associations under the heading 'Pearl': 'the embryo; cosmic life; the divine essence; the life-giving power of the Great Mother; the feminine principle of the ocean; the self-luminous; initiation; ... The pearl was thought to be the result of lightning [a traditional

¹ Luke 7.38.

² Surtees Cat. no. 250, plate 376. Bancroft Collection, Wilmington Society of Fine Arts, Delaware.

³ The dress Mary is wearing is identical with that in the painting *Il Ramoscello*, 1865. In this painting, bottom right, is a silver spherical container very similar to the alabaster box in *Mary Magdalene*.

⁴ *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.

emanation of the sun and storm god] penetrating the oyster, hence it was regarded as the union of fire and water, both fecundating forces, and so denotes birth and rebirth; fertility'. In Christian terms, the pearl is 'the hidden gnosis necessary for salvation, the "pearl of great price", for which man must dive into the waters of baptism and encounter dangers'. In classical terms, it stands for, 'Love and marriage, emblem of Aphrodite / Venus, the "Lady of the Pearls", who rose from the waters'. Both sets of associations are relevant to Rossetti's *Mary Magdalene*.

Earlier, I stated that the drawing symbolised the higher and lower aspects of love. In the poem *Jenny*, and the unfinished painting *Found*, as well as the drawing *Hesperia Rosa*, we find examples of the consequences of the lower love. These all share themes with *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*. In Rossetti's time the Magdalene was the favoured symbol of the fallen woman. Rossetti uses rose symbolism to illustrate this. In the ninth stanza of *Jenny*, he invokes the Biblical tale of the lilies of the field, and in the tenth combines the symbols of lily and rose together in a metaphor for Jenny herself:

What, Jenny, are your lilies dead?
Aye, and the snow-white leaves are spread
Like winter on the garden-bed.
But you had roses left in May,-
They were not gone too. Jenny, nay,
But must your roses die, and those
Their purpled buds that should uncloze?
Even so; the leaves are curled apart,
Still red as from the broken heart,
And here's the naked stem of thorns.

In stanza 25, he goes on to expand the metaphor of the despoiled rose. In *Found*, the same rose symbolism is continued through the use of the rose motif on the white dress of the literally fallen and despoiled girl.

In the drawing *Hesterna Rosa*, (*Yesterday's Rose*), 1853,¹ the scene depicts the result of a love-feast of the kind that we see in *Mary Magdalene*. Two girls are shown with their respective lovers; their costumes are similar in period and style, and they wear garlands in their hair as do the revellers in *Mary Magdalene*. Both the flowers in the garlands and the girls themselves are 'yesterday's roses'. The design is based on the following lines by Sir Henry Taylor, inscribed on the drawing:

Quoth tongue of neither maid nor wife
 To heart of neither wife nor maid:
 'Lead we not here a jolly life
 Betwixt the shine and shade?'
 Quoth heart of neither maid nor wife
 To tongue of neither wife nor maid:
 'Thou wag'st, but I am worn with strife,
 And feel like flowers that fade.'

Rossetti shows a monkey overlooking this scene, which symbolises both animal lust and the lower nature of man.² The most telling connection between this drawing and *Mary Magdalene*, is that the pattern that decorates the cloak of the lover who would restrain Mary from entering Simon's house is the same as that which decorates the sleeve of the lover on the left in *Hesterna Rosa*. In *Mary Magdalene*, however, Mary is not going to allow herself to be seduced, for she has found a higher love, and, through Christ, has found the higher nature of her own love. This is none other than the Rosicrucian dream of the reclaiming of the self, and of the restoration of this reclaimed self to Eden and the Paradisal state; for it is the Christ nature in us all that restores to us the state of Primal Man, that is, Adam. Both Nature and Man are redeemed through Christ (as here, through the process of the Sacred Marriage of Man to God), and are elevated to their rightful state in the Earthly

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 57, plate 21. Tate Gallery.

² The monkey is a common symbol for the lower man in alchemical illustrations. The alchemists (along with the Neoplatonists) believed that the soul of man had the potential to become either angel or beast. Fludd uses this symbolism.

Paradise. This is the same symbol employed by Dante in his own symbolic and spiritual restoration to the Earthly paradise through his love for Beatrice.

Themes from Dante.

In *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation*, 1855,¹

Rossetti again shows us a festive procession, though the scene here is more stately and dignified than that pictured in *Mary Magdalene*. The situation also appears to be exactly reversed; Beatrice does not try to leave the procession, nor does she have to be restrained from doing so. Here it is Dante who longs for Beatrice, and it is his love for her that is the elevating factor. While before it was Mary who stood without, here it is Dante who is excluded. While we know that Christ will accept Mary and raise her up, here, although we know that Beatrice will eventually do likewise for Dante, she denies him, and so plunges his soul into darkness and despair. While Christ was the beloved deity and saviour of Mary's soul, here it is Beatrice who is the beloved pseudo-deity and saviour of Dante's soul. The theme of marriage is again repeated, but here, Dante is not the bridegroom. This is the Sacred Marriage which Dante is denied, for the reason that, unlike Mary, his soul is not yet in a position to rise to the Earthly Paradise. If we transpose the word 'salvation' for the 'salutation' that has been denied, we see the exact position that Dante is in. This sets the scene for Dante's symbolic quest.

In *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1849-50, and 1859² (Fig.40), we see two scenes from Dante's great quest for the divine. Rossetti's first drawing for this design was done in 1849-50, and it was later developed into a series of three square-shaped panels which formed part of Morris's settle in the Red House. The square shape was here dictated by that of the already existing panels. *Dantis Amor* was originally the central panel of the overall design, standing between, on the left-hand side, *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Florence*, and on the right-hand side, *The Meeting of Beatrice and Dante in Paradise*. In the original concept, the central motif of love occupies a much narrower vertical space, and when the

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 50, plate 33. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

² Surtees Cat. no. 116, plates 172 and 173. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

panels were removed from the settle when the Morris's left the Red House, they were eventually re-framed without *Dantis Amor*, Love being painted directly onto the gold frame, much in the manner of the original drawing.

Rossetti's statement that 'The subjects are treated from the real and not the allegorical side of Dante's love story'¹ is misleading. William notes:

I have always been in a state of some mental suspense as to Beatrice; seeing some strong reasons for assuming her to be a real woman, and other strong reasons for assuming her to be (as my father contended) a merely symbolic personage. My brother was entirely for the real woman, scouting and ignoring my arguments to the contrary.²

What I believe Rossetti to have actually meant by this was that Beatrice was a real woman in precisely the same way that Christ was a real man; that their supernatural qualities were in no degree compromised by their corporeality. The two versions of Sonnet 3, *Love's Testament*, (originally Son.2, *Love's Redemption*), in which the Woman, the Ideal Beloved, replaces Love (Christ) as the Sacrament, testifies to Rossetti's personal position on this matter, whatever he might publicly declare to the contrary.

In *Dantis Amor*, the figure of Love united in marriage the solar and lunar components. Love is, as it were, the central link which holds in place the components either side of him. In *Dantis Amor*, Love acts as a kind of key to the entire painting, explaining, not only his own importance, but also his function as mediator. Taking *The Salutation of Beatrice* as a whole (with or without *Dantis Amor* as the centre section), we understand that Love's function here is also to unite the left and right-hand panels: that is, Beatrice and Dante on earth, and Beatrice and Dante in the Earthly Paradise. We know that it is through Love that Dante is brought to the Earthly Paradise, but the painting incorporates, too, the message that we have already found in *Mary Magdalene*, that is, the Rosicrucian dream of the

¹ *Letters*, II, 491, letter 506, to Ernest Gambart the art dealer. Gambart later bought *Dantis Amor*.

² *Ruskin: Rossetti: Pre-Raphaelitism*, p.262.

recovery of Eden.¹ Love, especially in Rossettian terms, is that which translates our present experience in this world, which here is represented by the left-hand panel, *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Florence*, into a transcendental experience which transforms *this* world into the Earthly Paradise, which is represented by the right-hand panel, *The Meeting of Beatrice and Dante in Paradise*. For Rossetti, *this* world was the world to be transformed. He is content with the Earthly Paradise, and never goes beyond this. He has no interest whatsoever in *Paradiso*. This, incidentally, is an even more marked feature of Morris's entire philosophy. It is the Rosicrucian dream of an actual Utopia and not the Christian dream of Heaven. It is not the denial of the material realm that they seek, but the *perfection* of the material realm in the Neoplatonist ideal of the marriage of heaven and earth. This is why the symbol of Purgatory is so important. It is a mountain, but it is also an Earthly mountain. The symbol of the mountain represents the alchemical and Rosicrucian toil of perfecting, refining, and assaying the material being of oneself. This is why Dante insisted that it was his material body that undertook the Quest. But it is not the perfection of oneself alone, it is the perfection of Nature also. The Mountain is, as it were, the Body of the World brought nearer God. This is why at the top of Mount Purgatory, and after passing through the ring of refining fire, Dante is literally purged, or assayed, and emerges into the Earthly Paradise. Whether Dante intended Mount Purgatory to be an alchemical metaphor or not (he almost certainly did), it was without doubt understood as such in later times: this surely is the message of Rossetti's *Hill Summit*, and more particularly, the sestet of *The Monochord*:

Oh! what is this that knows the road I came,
The flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame,
The lifted shifted steeps and all the way?

¹ Rossetti jokingly referred to his garden at Cheyne Walk as Eden, as in this letter to his aunt, Charlotte Polidori: 'My garden is looking nice again now, though left all to itself, and a wilderness in most people's opinions. I prefer to compare it to an Eden. At any rate, it is primitive enough by this time for the simile': *Letters*, II, 599, letter 681, dated 5th June 1866. The Rosicrucian ideal ultimately descends from the Neoplatonists: in the words of Pico, 'the Magus marries earth to heaven, that is to say the forces of inferior things to the gifts and properties of supernal things': Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, p.90. The motifs of marriage and descent/ascent are ever present.

Mount Purgatory and Mount Sion, in a Rosicrucian alchemical sense, are one and the same place. It is the place of the systematic upward toil within the self. In this painting, the earthly vision of Beatrice is translated, or more correctly, transfigured, into the Paradisal vision of Beatrice.¹ And this through the central figure of Love.

In the painting, the left-hand panel shows Beatrice in the company of two other ladies descending a flight of steps: this I understand to be the descent of the female trinity into a lower state of existence, such as in the sestet of Sonnet 3, *Love's Testament*:

when the whole
Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal
And weary water of the place of sighs,
And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!

Rossetti chose the line from the *Vita Nuova* to illustrate this part of the painting; 'My lady carries love within her eyes'.² This is the nature of Beatrice, and her role. Dante is at the same time shown ascending the steps, and it is through the influence of Beatrice that he is able to do so: this prefigures his climb from the lower state up the steps of Mount Purgatory that is yet in store for him. Beatrice is Dante's saviour, who has descended for the purpose of rescuing his soul and returning it to its rightful place in heaven. This prefigures all the Neoplatonic theories discussed earlier in this work.

We may link this triple-aspect of Beatrice with her depiction in *Dantis Amor*, where we note that both Christ and Beatrice are assigned to triangles formed by the diagonal that divides the square shape into two. Thus both Christ and Beatrice are depicted as complementary trinities. In this picture, Christ and Beatrice are equals: they form one

¹ This accounts for Rossetti's insistence that Beatrice was a real woman. It should be added that the alchemists used the symbol of the Assumption of the Virgin to illustrate the translation of the *material* body (or material Nature) to Heaven.

² *Letters*, II, 491, letter 506, to Gambart.

whole (the overall square formed by the combination of their two triangles).¹ They are the counterparts of each other, and the same is true in the symbolism we have already found in *Mary Magdalene*.

This is also true of the way Dante portrays Beatrice: she is the equivalent of Christ, and Dante's Saviour. In the *Vita Nuova*, as in Rossetti's paintings, she represents a goddess figure. As the number Nine, she represents the compass of the material universe.² And this is how Rossetti portrays her in *Dantis Amor*. The *Vita Nuova* is a paean to Dante's worship of the Divine Feminine. Beatrice is a deity in her own right, and Dante tells us who she is, in the words of his Master: 'He who should inquire delicately touching this matter, could not but call Beatrice by mine own name, which is to say, Love; beholding her so like unto me'.³ Thus Beatrice is Love, that is, Venus. It is Lunar Venus who is the goddess of the material universe, and her sacred precinct is the Earthly Paradise. This is also the subject of Rossetti's later painting, *The Blessed Damozel*.

This is seen in the right-hand panel, *The Meeting of Beatrice and Dante in Paradise*. Rossetti's painting follows the description in *Purgatorio* which describes Beatrice; 'With a white veil and a wreath of olive, a lady appeared to me wearing a green mantle over a dress of the colour of living flame'.⁴ In the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice appears with the dawn 'amid a cloud of flowers',⁵ but Dante is smitten with fear, and dare not look at Beatrice for his shame. Rossetti ignores the pageant that has preceded the arrival of Beatrice, keeping only to the psychology of the moment when Dante lifts his head from his hands and looks on Beatrice unveiled. It is this spontaneous moment when their eyes meet that he captures. Behind Beatrice in the painting, stand two attendants, and once again a female trinity is formed. This is a poignant personal moment captured between two lovers, but behind it stands a metaphor: Rossetti is fully aware that Beatrice is a goddess - his father's work stressed the point, identifying her with Isis - and this moment of the unveiling denotes that

¹ The triangle is composed of threes, and three is the number of the Spirit: the square is a four, which represents Matter. This image shows spirit-within-matter, and also that it is the union of spiritual opposites which compose and drive the material universe, an important Rosicrucian theme.

² See the earlier discussion on Sonnet 27, *Heart's Compass*.

³ *Works*, II, 69. Dante also quotes the words of Homer, 'She seemed not to be the daughter of a mortal man, but of God': II, 31.

⁴ *Letters*, II, 491. *Purg.*, XXX.31

⁵ *Purg.*, XXX.28.

Dante has achieved the spiritual and alchemical Quest, and that the occult secrets of the Goddesshead are no longer concealed from him. He finally sees her as she truly is: 'Look on me well: I am, I am Beatrice'.¹ The stress on this 'I am' reminds us of Biblical Yahweh's self assertion. Dante stands before Beatrice on the top of the Mount of the Quest as Moses stood before God on Mount Sinai. This metaphor would be well understood in Rosicrucian and occult circles. It is also comparable to the achievement of the Grail; Mount Savage has been climbed, entry to the Grail Castle secured, the Question formulated and asked, and the Grail revealed. Although the symbols differ, the meaning behind them is identical, for it is man's perilous Quest to find and stand before God, who resides in the invisible kingdom.

In another painting, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, 1853² (Fig.41), Rossetti produced one of his most successful images. The painting depicts the occasion when Dante, musing on the death of Beatrice, draws an image of an angel.³ So lost in thought is he that he fails to notice the intrusion of some important visitors. After they have left, he returns to drawing angels. Although the *Vita Nuova* does not specifically state that 'the resemblance of an angel' was also that of Beatrice, in other places, the analogy between the two is made. For instance, Dante relates how as a child, Love 'oftentimes commanded me to seek if I might see this youngest of the Angels'.⁴ Again, Dante relates that after Beatrice had passed by, people would comment, 'This is not a woman, but one of the beautiful angels of Heaven'.⁵

These are important clues to the understanding of this painting as are the words of Dante to those who have disturbed him, 'Another was with me'.⁶ To understand this, we need to explore how Dante fits into this particular form of tradition. The formulation of the angelic hierarchies stems from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,⁷ and had through Thomas

¹ *Purg.*, XXX.73.

² Surtees Cat. no. 58, plate 51. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. First drawings, 1849, Cat. no. 42, plates 27 and 28. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: Royal Institute of British Architects, respectively.

³ *Works*, II, 84.

⁴ *Ibid*, II, 31.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.73.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.84.

⁷ St Dionysius the Areopagite was converted by St Paul in the first century AD, was the first Bishop of Athens, and was martyred. The works we are here considering were attributed to St Dionysius in the

Aquinas become an essential part of Christian theology. Pseudo-Dionysius was heavily influenced by Platonism, and envisaged nine orders of angels grouped into divisions of three beyond the planetary spheres. Dante took these orders and rearranged them in the *Divine Comedy*. They are described in Canto XXVIII of *Paradiso*: ‘Dionysius set himself so ardently / To fix upon these orders his regard, / He named them and distinguished them as I’.¹ The use of angelic magic also constitutes an important part in the Cabala, where in the Zohar, an Archangel is set over each of the four quarters of the heavens - ‘Michael on the right hand, Gabriel on the left, Auriel in front and Raphael behind. In the midst of all is Shekinah, to whom the symbol of the Rose is especially consecrated’.² The Cabala found its way into the work of Dante, as did alchemy. Both the Grail Romances and the *Divine Comedy* are the repositories of a vast array of influences from all quarters. Thus, as well as the recognised place that angelic lore played in Christian theology, it also held a place in occultism. This was even more the case with the Neoplatonists, who developed it yet further. Ficino, for instance, was particularly indebted to Dante,³ while Pico, who was a fervent student of Cabala, more fully developed this influence of angelic magic with his vision of ‘the three worlds’.⁴ This is described in *Heptaplus*, in which the three angelic orders are related to each of these worlds: he tells us that in the lowest order, ‘Angels attend to private matters and each of them is assigned to an individual human being’.⁵ This is apparent in Rossetti’s painting with its implication of Dante’s words, ‘Another was with

Middle Ages, but are now known to be the work of an anonymous author who goes under the title of Pseudo-Dionysius.

¹ Lines 130-3.

² Waite, *The Hermetic Papers of AE Waite*, p.159.

³ ‘Ficino’s notions on the celestial hierarchies have been modified by two intermediaries, namely Thomas Aquinas and Dante, and he has also introduced new modifications of his own. The differing activities of the hierarchies, which are not so specifically defined in Pseudo-Dionysius, he got from Thomas Aquinas. The linking of the hierarchies with the spheres of the cosmos he got from Dante who, in his *Convivio* correlates the hierarchies with the spheres and, above all, in the *Paradiso*, sets out the souls of the blest on the spheres of the seven planets; places the Apostles and the Church Triumphant in the eighth sphere; in the ninth sphere ranges the nine angelic hierarchies; and crowns all with the Trinity in the Empyrean.

Ficino was a great student of Dante, and was certainly thinking of the *Paradiso* in the passage on the hierarchies analysed above for he makes a reference to Dante’s poem in it.’ Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.119.

⁴ ‘Particularly in the third book of the *Heptaplus* Pico devotes himself to assimilating the doctrines of the “ancient Hebrews” to those of Dionysius.’ Ibid, p.121.

⁵ Ibid, p.122.

me'.¹ The actual line of transmission of this angelic magic in the Hermetic Tradition runs as follows: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Ficino and Pico, Reuchlin, Trimethius, Cornelius Agrippa, Dee, and thus to the Rosicrucians, and in particular, Fludd. The angelic hierarchies were particularly important to the Rosicrucian system, in which the material world was constantly informed by the spiritual and angelic realms.² Thus here we may see a direct link between Dante, the Rosicrucians, and Rossetti.

In Rossetti's painting, we see the angels looking down on Dante, even if they are only decorations on the cornice. The particular form that these angels take, that is, the head and crossed wings only, often appear in Rosicrucian illustrations, such as Fludd's. In the background of the painting is the spherical copper water urn and semi-circular bowl, whisk and towel that we have noted before: beyond this the stairs mount to the level of the angels (symbolised by those on the cornice). Light is shown pouring down the stairs from this upper level. Also above the urn are three jars of the lunar colours red, black, and white. Also in the background of the room are an icon of the Mother and Child, a circular mirror, which in Rossettian symbolism represents the moon, and a trinity of lilies. FG Stephens describes how these details convey the intentions of the painting:

Outside the chamber and beyond the half-withdrawn *portiere* we see a closet with a brass cistern suspended over a basin for washing hands, one of those quite 'impracticable' staircases which, as with his musical instruments, were the despair of the specialists, and, farther off, a serene landscape, comprising a sunlit meadow, a

¹ We find this particular facet resurfacing in the nineteenth century, when angelic theology was revived and became a noticeably strong influence once more. This, I maintain, ultimately stems from a Rosicrucian source, in the preservation and transmission of Neoplatonic ideas. Digby, for instance, in *The Broad Stone of Honour* (1823 ed.), perpetuates this idea in the Preface, pp. lviii-ix. He quotes from Bishop Bull on angelic doctrine; 'every faithful person, during his life on earth, hath his particular guardian-angel more constantly to preside and watch over him'.

² The Rosicrucian angelic magic was directly derived from the Cabala, as Yates notes: 'A striking feature of Cabalism is the importance assigned to angels or divine spirits as intermediaries throughout this system, arranged in hierarchies corresponding to the other hierarchies'. *Op. cit.*, p.92. The other hierarchies to which she refers are those of the Sephiroth and its relationship with the planetary spheres, as propounded by Pico. She writes elsewhere (p.104): 'In what forms - perhaps more sublimely beautiful in his [Pico's] imagination than even the angelic forms painted by a Botticelli or a Raphael - did Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael come to dwell with Pico della Mirandola? ... The operative Magi of the Renaissance were the artists'. Burne-Jones brought the depiction of angels to a particularly fine state.

shadowy wood, and, overhead, that brooding, softly-glowing firmament, which, with Rossetti as with other poet-painters, attests the perfect peace of a Paradise beyond the grave. In this way the artist took us from the busy Arno, past the dim, half-lighted room where Dante sojourned with his grief, and through the narrow pass of Death, whose purifying function is indicated by the basin and its appurtenances, until, remote but bright, the pleasaunce of Eternity is discovered to be 'beyond the veil,' which is represented by the *portiere*.¹

The painting is remarkably similar to an illustration of the alchemical philosopher worshipping in his laboratory, in Heinrich Khunrath's *Ampitheatrum Sapientiae aeternae*.... Hanover, 1609² (Fig.42). Rossetti's painting is not a direct imitation - however, the kneeling position of the philosopher and his placement near the edge of the picture area, facing outwards, and the general clutter of his laboratory with musical instruments, jars, etc., the feeling of perspective, and the deliberate stress placed on light and shade, find an echo in Rossetti's painting. Rossetti's painting also employs a trick he sometimes uses when borrowing from the work of another artist - he reverses the image.

Next, I turn to Rossetti's drawing of 1867, entitled *Rosa Triplex*³ (Fig.43). This was later produced as a watercolour in 1874.⁴ This is a triple-study of May Morris from the waist up, showing each version of her holding a rose. It is so arranged with hands and arms linking as to suggest the Three Graces, although none of the views are from the rear. The title, together with the association between flower and girl, is intended to suggest the triple aspect of lunar Aphrodite. This is a straightforward example of typical Rossettian symbolism. However, besides this, there is also an interesting Rosicrucian connection. A

¹ *DGR*, p.35. Stephens also notes the angels on the cornice with 'wings put cross-wise on their breasts' in characteristic Rosicrucian manner.

² Yates writes on this volume: 'In Khunrath's work we meet with the characteristic phraseology of the [Rosicrucian] manifestos, the everlasting emphasis on macrocosm and microcosm, the stress on Magic, Cabala, and Alchymia as in some way combining to form a religious philosophy which promises a new dawn for mankind': *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p.38. 'This engraving is a visual expression of the kind of outlook which John Dee summed up in his *Monas hieroglyphica*, a combination of Cabalist, alchemical, and mathematical disciplines through which the adept believed that he could achieve both a profound insight into nature and vision of a divine world beyond nature': p.39.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 238 A, plate 349. Tate Gallery.

⁴ Surtees Cat. no. 238, plate 348. Private collection.

Rosicrucian illustration of a Vision of a Lion with Angels and Roses (Fig.44), from Christopher Kotter's *Revelationes ... ab anno 1616 ad annum 1624*, in *Lux in tenebris*, (a suitably Rossetian title), shows three angels sitting at a table, holding hands in a triangular pattern, with roses standing vertically before them. A lion rampant stands upright between them on the table, in an allusion to the politics of the time. The joint which holds the table together is in the form of an equal-armed cross. If we take the upper part of this illustration, that is, from the table-top up, it shows a striking resemblance to Rossetti's image. This is more clearly the case in his study for the painting of 1867.

This brings us finally to Rossetti's most famous vision from Dante, *Beata Beatrix*, 1862-70,¹ which depicts the transfiguration of Beatrice. With Love in red in the shadows on the left, and Dante dressed in black in the shadows on the right, the background is broken into three spaces, the central of which is as a shaft of light that descends and forms a halo round Beatrice's hair. The shadows are those of *Dantis Tenebrae*, and that which is held in shadow is that which is hidden and not revealed, that is, the occult. It is 'The vale of dark magical mysteries'. FG Stephens writes:

The true inspiration of his theme required that the figure of Beatrix, being an inmate of that border-realm which divides Life from Death should appear occult, and with nothing defined - neither form, nor colour, nor substance, nor shadow, nor light direct, nor positive elements of any sort ... his Beatrix is in a rapture of approaching death, absorbed in a painless ecstasy having knowledge of the world to come ere her spirit quits its mortal house, so that while her features attest mortality, the fair mansion is not void of life.²

The light that stands as a pillar between these areas of shadow is that divine passage of light descending onto Beatrice, and of her transfiguration upwards into the realm of light, as light.³ In the Platonic sense, it is the stripping off of the corporeal body of the 'house of

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 168, plate 238. Tate Gallery.

² Anderson and Wright, *Heaven on Earth*, pp.95-6. Note the use of the 'House of Life' motif.

³ It is a curious feature of this painting, which places so much emphasis on light-symbolism, that Rossetti gets the sun-dial completely wrong. The shadow is meant to point to the hour of Beatrice's death, nine, but

life', which finally allows the true form of Beatrice to be seen in all its splendour. If we understand this to be a mystical event of the greatest sanctity, then we see how (in the background) Love has led Dante to witness this 'lifting of the veil'. Rossetti has compressed matters here, because this does not actually occur until Dante has re-met Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise and is finally allowed to witness her in her true form there. As we have already seen, he hardly dares lift his eyes to meet hers as she declares, 'Look on me well: I am, I am Beatrice'. The difference is of course that between the earthly and spiritual nature of Beatrice, and this painting is, as it were, a snapshot of the instant *before* that change. We as ordinary mortals are precluded from witnessing the 'lifting of the veil', as indeed is the artist from painting it. But what Rossetti can and does do, is to show that Love has led Dante to witness it. In short, we are not meant to apprehend with the intellect, but to respond with the soul. This is a Mystery, and cannot be apprehended except by the deeper self. Thus we know this is not death we are witnessing, but a translation into 'new life'. This is not the *Vita Nuova*, but the spiritual essence of the *Vita Nuova*.

the gnomon of this type of sun-dial always points to twelve - that is, the point nearest to Beatrice's shoulder. Here, the shadow is cast on an impossible point on the dial, when the sun would be shining on the other side of the world. The ninth hour on the dial would be at approximately 40 degrees to the axis of the gnomon (this is dependant on the exact degree of latitude of Florence). Here, Rossetti shows the twelfth hour at right-angles to the gnomon - therefore the gnomon is in the wrong relationship to the dial. The shadow cast also bears no relationship to the apparent light source. If this is not simply for reasons of artistic licence (which I think it is), the only possible significance would be to indicate that Beatrice is now beyond the bounds of time - that is, immortal. Rossetti also places the gnomon of the sundial the wrong way round in *La Pia de' Tolomei*.

CHAPTER 9

THE GODDESS FIGURE OF ROSSETTI'S LATER PAINTINGS.

Beata Beatrix represents a crucial turning point in Rossetti's artwork. For Rossetti the change was more than artistic. 1862 was the year in which Elizabeth Siddal died.¹ It would not be going too far to state that at this time his former life also died, and that he would emerge from it a different and more mature artist, both poetically and visually. The image of the death of his wife in *Beata Beatrix* is highly charged with symbolism on a purely private and emotional level for Rossetti. Yet, at the same time, one cannot deny that, mingled with this despair, was also a tremendous release; Rossetti was now free to explore his emotional innerworld.

Rossetti's first vision of the 'goddess' is Mary Virgin in the two original PRB paintings. By far the most interesting of these, from our point of view, is *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, or *The Annunciation*² (Fig.45), as it was later renamed. Unlike the first painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849,³ which collected general praise, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, which was exhibited in 1850, attracted almost universal abuse. As a result of this Rossetti, with very few exceptions, refused to exhibit again in public, and later prohibited his patrons from doing so on his behalf. He also changed the painting's name to *The Annunciation* to counter any inferences of Catholicism being drawn from the original Latin title.

Perhaps part of the reason for the abuse the painting attracted is the essentially *modern* character of the image. It was so strikingly modern for 1850, that this response was hardly surprising. Looking at it as we do with contemporary eyes, we may fail to recognise this point. It is spare, it is stark, it is clean. It was the total contradiction of all that Victorian art stood for. Not until Whistler, and later Mackintosh, used these same characteristics would they again be placed before the public. Rossetti, however, was not intending to be 'modern' in quite this sense; what he was in fact trying to do was to produce a starkly symbolic image. Rossetti later wrote of it, 'In point of time it is the ancestor of all the *white*

¹ On the morning of February 11th.

² Surtees Cat. no. 44, plate 29. Tate Gallery.

³ Surtees Cat no. 40, plate 26. Tate Gallery.

pictures which have since become so numerous - but here there was an ideal motive for the whiteness'.¹ When William was acting as the art critic of *The Spectator*, Rossetti asked him, when writing about his paintings, 'to dwell particularly on the fact that my religious subjects have been entirely independent in treatment of any corresponding representation, and [are] indeed altogether original in the inventions'.² At the same time he wrote to his aunt Charlotte, that 'I know by experience that you might as well expect a Liverpool merchant to communicate with his Chinese correspondent without the intervention of someone who knows the language as imagine that he could look at the picture in question with the remotest glimmering of its purpose'.³ William wrote that this picture was specifically a 'vehicle for representing ideas'.⁴ These quotations all stress Rossetti's intentions that this painting employed a fundamentally radical approach to the theme of the Annunciation, and this through its symbolism.

First of all we must look at the colour symbolism, and in particular the 'ideal motive for the whiteness'. There can be no doubt that the primary purpose is to place a stress on the ideal purity of the Virgin. The blue hanging behind her is the traditional colour of the robes of the Virgin, deriving from her status as Queen of Heaven. But this would have been easily understood by the Liverpool merchant. In several of his woodcuts, Durer shows Mary in conjunction with the crescent moon, which he makes her own special symbol. One of the best known instances is found on the title page of his *Life of the Virgin*.⁵ Rossetti's painting, along with *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, was originally planned as a trinity of paintings on this theme, which would have ended with one on the Death of the Virgin, although this was never begun. Rossetti was well aware of Durer's prints and their symbolism, having handled the originals in the British Library collection.⁶

¹ Surtees, loc. cit.

² *Letters*, I, 104, letter 70. 30th August 1851.

³ *Ibid*, p.101, letter 67, to Charlotte Lydia Polidori.

⁴ 1st July 1850. Tate Gallery Cat., p.73.

⁵ Barlow, *Woodcuts of Albrecht Durer*, plate 86. Durer frequently uses lunar symbolism in his iconography; in *The Virgin and the Carthusian Monks* (plate 99), he shows Mary standing upon the lunar crescent, while in a broad arc above her he places the date 1515 in such a form that it reads ISIS, Isis being the pagan prototype for Mary. This number-form, while not uncommon in Renaissance prints, is here placed in such a position as to be at the very least ambiguous, if not totally explicit. In his title page to the *Apocalypse*, Durer again depicts Mary in the crescent moon (plate 84).

⁶ Rossetti's friend WB Scott was an expert on the Renaissance print; he later published the first monograph on Durer in England in 1869.

Turning back to Rossetti's painting of the Virgin, we may now infer that the whiteness relates to lunar Mary herself. In alchemical terms, she is the *femina alba*, 'the white, lunar, feminine principle; the white lily, the second stage of the Great Work'.¹ The blue cloth behind her represents the blue of the heavens; indeed we see this through the open window. She is the Lunar-goddess who is bound in sacred marriage to the Solar-king, and who will bear the child that will ultimately take his place. In Biblical terms Christ is born to supersede the God of the Old Testament.² We may also equate Mary with the Vessel of the Grail.

In Renaissance art, the act of the fertilisation of the Virgin is often symbolically shown as a ray of sunlight which displays the solar nature of God. Mary, in turn, is often symbolised as a pure vessel, often in the form of a glass jar. In alchemy, the vessel, or *vas*, is the glass alembic in which the Work takes place; it is 'the matrix or uterus from which the philosophers' stone is born'.³ In Rosicrucian terms, the Philosophers' Stone is Christ. Glass is the symbol of perfect purity; it is at once a material substance, which illustrates Mary's human nature as a material being (and not an immortal deity), but, at the same time is so pure that it may be penetrated by the light of the Godhead.⁴ Rossetti shows just such a jar with a rose in it in the background of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. In the sestet of his sonnet for this picture, Rossetti writes a description of the as yet unpainted *Ecce Ancilla Domini*!:

¹ Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, Glossary. It is perhaps rather ambitious to attempt to enter the complex world of Cabalistic symbolism in a footnote: however it is important to note that these symbols hold an important place therein. Waite writes, *Hermetic Papers*, p.115: 'Finally, there is the fourth world of Assiah or Malkuth, the region of manifest things, in correspondence with the Metallic Woman, Moon-Lady, and Medicine for the White, "so-called because she hath received a whitening splendour from the sun." There is only one way to explain this allocation, and it is by recourse to theosophical Kabalism on its highest mystical side. The sun is that Divine Luminary which is termed Jehovah in the *Zohar*, but also by other Sacred Names, and the Moon-Lady is Shekinah, connected in her manifestation with Malkuth.'

² 'She was Faith's Present, parting what had been / From what began with her, and is for aye': *For an Annunciation, Early German* - DGR.

³ Cooper, Glossary.

⁴ As in the 13th century Christmas carol: As the sunbeam through the glass
 Passeth but not staineth,
 So the Virgin as she was,
 Virgin still remaineth.

Elizabeth Haig, *Floral Symbolism of the Great Masters* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1913), p.174. The Tate Gallery Catalogue, p.73, states that a vase was originally included in the painting, but was later painted out.

She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
At all, - yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed:
Because the fulness of the time was come.

Here, the fullness of the time has come. Her golden halo links her head with the sky-blue cloth, but this is not the darkness of the night sky. Her halo represents the sun. At this precise moment we are shown the conjunction of the Sun and Moon; it is the moment of sacred impregnation. Not here the traditional ray of light, but rather the symbol of the Sun itself.¹

Before her stands the angel of the Annunciation, who is of course Gabriel, bearing his lily like a wand. In the magical Cabala, as I have previously stated, Gabriel is the Archangel who presides over the realm of the moon, and who governs the element of water.² This is no doubt why it is Gabriel who traditionally brings the Annunciation to lunar Mary. Rossetti's depiction of the Archangel is, as far as I know, unique in art, in that he is shown with flames at his feet instead of wings. FG Stephens writes: 'there is special significance in the fiery feet of the Messenger of God. The idea of the Annunciation as a mystery, thus illustrated by the namesake of the Harbinger is imperfectly appreciated without recognition of the character of the fire streaming from the feet of the Messenger of Peace as he approached the earth.'³ The flames at the Archangel's feet suggest the Rosicrucian tradition of sacred fire that we have noted throughout.⁴ The lamp in the background is certainly a symbol that the Rosicrucians often claim as their own.

The tree in the background is also of some importance; there is no pictorial reason why it should be included, nor for the particular position in which it is shown. However, we

¹ This motif of the sun in conjunction with the head of the Virgin will be seen to be of some importance as we progress.

² Yeats writes: 'Gabriel is angel of the Moon in the Cabbala and might, I considered, command the waters': *Autobiographies*, p.269.

³ *DGR*, p.23. Did DGR see himself as 'the Messenger of God' as 'namesake of the Harbinger'? WMR records in the *Pre-Raphaelite Diaries*, for April 7th 1850, 'He has got some spirits of wine and chloride of something to make the flame for the angel's feet'. Gabriel as the Messenger of God equates with Hermetic Mercury.

⁴ See especially pages 23-4 and 294-8.

must remember that trees in general represent Matter, and are a symbol of vegetative growth governed by the Goddess in her lunar capacity. A cedar of Lebanon is shown in Brown's *Our Ladye of Saturday Night*, where it also appears through a window in the background. Rossetti's tree has a spiral of growth around it, which indicates increase. The dove connects the tree to the blue hanging. An implied line develops from the lower trunk down to the tip of the lily, along its stem, and points to the womb of the Virgin. The lily is not phallic, as is often suggested;¹ it points the wrong way. It indicates growth *out* of the womb of the Virgin. The tree is thus unambiguously the Tree of Life, which stems from the Virgin, who is the creative principle of material life in the universe. The tree shown here is the silver-fir, *Pinus sylvestris*, which means 'pine of the woods or forests'. It is also the birth-tree of the Moon-goddess Artemis.² Graves relates that Elatus, or Elate, "the lofty one", [was] a name transferred from Artemis to her sacred tree - an ivy-twined, fir-coned-tipped branch of which was waved in her honour at the Dionysian revels'.³ This is an important symbol, for it is the thyrsus, a pine branch wrapped with ivy and vine and tipped with a pine-cone: the pine branch therefore represents the tree of the *mother*, whose son is represented by the vine, the evergreen ivy and the pine-cone - the pine-cone (Dionysus) literally being the fruit of the tree. The same formula is found in the Christian phrase, 'The fruit of thy womb, Jesus'. Mary is the *pura arbor*, 'literally the "essential or unspoiled tree", symbolising virginity'.⁴ The pine as mother supports her son, the ivy and the vine. Christ is the later counterpart of Dionysus. The prototype of the god Osiris was born under a fir-tree, and Adonis was born from a myrrh-tree. It seems obvious that the symbolism fits well within the overall scheme of the painting and its meaning. The three most important points are 1) Mary is Lunar, 2) God is Light, and, 3) Christ is the Divine Child, whose birth

¹ For instance by Alastair Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Pre-Raphaelite Period, 1848-50* (Hingham, Norfolk: Real World Publications, 1973), p.21: 'the angel's hands which bless the Virgin ... carry the phallic budding lily'.

² This is the primary reason why we traditionally have a Christmas Tree. Graves writes in *The White Goddess*, p.190, that the fir-tree is 'a female tree ... sacred in Greece to Artemis the Moon-goddess who presided over childbirth, and the prime birth-tree of Northern Europe, familiar in the Nativity context'. Its Italian counterpart, the elm, 'was used for supporting the young vine and so became the *almer mater* of the Wine-god.' He adds, pp.191-2: 'The silver fir has its station on the first day of the year, the birthday of the Divine Child, the extra day of the winter solstice'.

³ *White Goddess*, p.191.

⁴ Cooper, Glossary.

is associated with the pine-tree. In these terms, we may understand the painting as complying with the Rosicrucian message.¹

In the last chapter, when examining the symbolism of the Grail, I made the connection between the Self and the arid wasteland.² I have also already pointed out the connection between Mary as the Holy Vessel and the Grail. The Vessel of the Grail is both life-giving and life-sustaining. Earlier, in connection with the Spirit of Vegetation (Attis, Adonis, Christ, etc.), we determined that this figure stood simply for *Life* itself. Thus Mary, as Mother of God, is also Mother of Life, in the symbolic sense of the Grail. She receives, contains, gives birth to, supports, and ultimately takes back to her God as Life, or alternatively, Life as God.³ In an earlier chapter we saw this same sequence in terms of the Goddess as the Tree of Life.⁴ Here we see that the Grail supplies the same motif. The dove, symbol of Venus, was also the heraldic charge of the Grail Knights in Wolfram's *Parzival*.

Perhaps the most important symbol we may draw from the Virgin, is that she stands for the symbol of the Soul, the Anima. In Rossetti's painting she displays her pure quality in the overall whiteness of the image. As the moon draws light from the sun, so the soul shines under God. In this painting, we may understand the soul as being impregnated with the seed of Light (which is also Life and Love) that will develop into the child that is the Son of Light within. This is the basic motif that we earlier explored in Sonnet 2, *Bridal Birth*. This is the Mystic Child which each and every one of us has the potential to find and develop within ourselves. Individually we must 'become Mary and bear God from within'.⁵ Again, Mary is the Grail: she is the symbol of the personal soul that holds the Son of Light

¹ We may speculate that the fir-tree may also in this context represent a *fire*-tree, the red colour of its upper branches suggesting flames. Waite, in *Hidden Church*, p.560, alludes to the Rosicrucian 'mystic Fir-Cone, a mystery enfolded within and without by many meanings'.

² Page 308.

³ The dying Attis lay beneath a pine-tree, into which he became transformed, and which thereafter became his symbol. Whether we understand this to mean that he was reabsorbed by the Mother, or that he rather took to himself the symbol of the Mother is a pertinent point. Perhaps, like a Christ-figure, we should see him as being sacrificed to the Mother in the form of the Tree of Life. Attis died as a result of castration, and this reminds us of the Fisher King in the Grail legends, who is similarly mortally wounded in the genitals. An illustration of Attis dying between a pine and a palm appears in Baring and Cashford, *Myth of the Goddess*, p.407.

⁴ See pages 178-184 and 218-221.

⁵ Angelus Silesius quoted by Matthews, *The Grail*, p.16.

that is the Divine Child Christ. This is the transcendent form of the ancient Mystery, fundamental to mystic alchemy and most especially to Rosicrucianism. The heart, of which Mary as Grail is the symbol, is the House of the Son / Sun. This is the true and mystical House of Life of which the material body is the external metaphor. Thus the external function of Mary is mirrored internally in the heart of the individual. The Self, or rather the heart of the Self as seat of the soul, is the Vessel of the Grail. Thus Mary as Grail, and the human heart as seat of the soul, are one and the same, the sacred Vessel of the Son of Light. This is symbolised in the painting by the lily, symbol of the Virgin, which points directly at the heart of Gabriel. Without the Grail which contains the Sun / Son of the soul, the life of the Self is the Wasteland.

It is here that the state of virginity becomes an important symbol in itself: or perhaps we should rather say that Mary becomes a symbol of this state. This is of particular relevance when we consider the Morris- Burne-Jones Brotherhood, whose members espoused celibacy, and whose patron was the virgin Red-Cross knight, Sir Galahad. This dedication to the virgin state may seem puzzling. Although this forms part of the chivalrous tradition resurrected (or more accurately re-created) in the nineteenth century and reconstructed by Girouard,¹ it in fact goes further. The state of virginity provides the creation of the sacred Vessel Mary within the heart and soul which is essential for the Christ-self to be born into. The Virgin stands for this principle in an inner sense, while Sir Galahad stands for the same in an exterior sense. This ultimately creates the male-female of the Self which is the Sacred Marriage of the opposites from which the androgynous Holy Child is born into the soul. This is perhaps why Hunt's *Light of the World* is composed of male and female elements in that the He-She provides the model of this state. In Rossetti's poetry, as we have seen, it is this ecstatic union of male and female that provides union with God.² In the Grail story, it

¹ In *Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*.

² In alchemy, it was often the practice that the Great Work was performed by a male and female working in conjunction to achieve the end. They were often regarded as a mystical pair of Brother and Sister, although they could be man and wife. The Sacred Marriage was an entirely mystical concept which could only take place in the purity of the undefiled soul. In Bulwer Lytton's Rosicrucian novel *Zanoni*, the alchemist must not allow his emotions to interfere with the Work, and it is through surrendering to mortal love that Zanoni loses his immortality. The reason given is that 'Idealism [of which Zanoni is the type] is more subjected than Science to the Affections, or to Instinct, because the Affections, sooner or later, force Idealism into the Actual, and in the Actual its immortality departs': fn., p.406.

is from the union of Lancelot and the Grail Maiden that Galahad is born.¹ We may draw from this that, as in the Christian myth, although union of some sort *must* take place, virginity is not lost: this is the enduring paradox of the scheme.

If *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* stands for an ideal of spirituality, then *Bocca Baciata*, 1859² (Fig.46), stands for an ideal of sensuality. This painting marks a turning point for Rossetti; William remarks that with it he 'had well emerged from the tentative or experimental stage'.³ It is the first of what was to become in a sense Rossetti's trademark, that is, paintings whose sole subject was not simply woman herself, but woman as a complete symbol of femininity. This was so much the case that Hunt was genuinely shocked by what he described as its 'gross sensuality of a revolting kind'.⁴ He added that 'He had now completely changed his philosophy, which he showed in his art, leaving Stoicism for Epicureanism'.⁵ Swinburne commented that this painting 'is more stunning than can be decently expressed'.⁶ *Bocca Baciata* is indeed a remarkable painting, the more so from a painter who had hitherto depicted chivalric and Biblical themes.

If *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* showed us the Lunar-goddess in her white virginal state, *Bocca Baciata* shows us the same goddess in her mature red phase, that of the lover. The title comes from Boccaccio; 'The mouth that has been kissed [*bocca baciata*] loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon'.⁷ Rossetti inscribed these words on the back of the painting. A white rose sits in her copper-coloured hair, and an apple rests on the wall in the foreground. Around her neck is a golden neckpiece upon which are flowers that echo the marigolds in the background, one of which the girl holds. The golden flowers of her neckpiece consist of eight circular petals around the circle of the centre, nine circles in all, the number of the material universe. These are similar in design to the gem

¹ If we understand Lancelot as a form of the Sun-god (or at least his representative the Year-king), the Grail Maiden as Vessel, and Galahad as Holy Child, this then corresponds to the Biblical Jehovah, Mary, and Christ.

² Surtees Cat. no. 114, plate 186. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

³ *Designer and Writer*, p.37.

⁴ Surtees, loc. cit.

⁵ *PRism and the PRB*, II, 143.

⁶ Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p.86.

⁷ Surtees, loc. cit., fn. p.68.

worn by Venus in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*. She wears earrings of three golden discs which indicate her trinity. In her hair, opposite the white rose, she wears a piece of jewellery. Rossetti's tendency to use dresses, jewellery, musical instruments, and various other ornaments, in a number of different paintings gives the impression that such pieces were simply drawn from Rossetti's stock collection and used as the whim took him. But I would suggest these pieces of jewellery, and other items, are better understood as a part of his symbolic code. This jewel displays the function of the woman in her form of the self-renewing Lunar-goddess. The jewel consists of a lozenge made up of sixteen balls, from which hang seven pendants. The form of the lozenge starts from one single ball on the left, expands across its centre to its maximum of four balls, then decreases again to a single ball on the right. This appears to suggest the waxing and waning of the moon. Again, if one draws a line from the left-hand corner to the right hand, or covers the lower part with a piece of straight-edged paper across these points, one finds that one has a perfect Pythagorean Tetractys; that is four balls at the base, three above, two above this, and above all, a single ball. Assuming the same base, this is mirrored below, forming two triangles, one pointing up, and one down, in a perfect duality. From the same horizontal extremes of the lozenge, the balls form a chevron of seven points to the lowest point, and it is from these seven balls that the pendants hang. The pendants form seven rays pointing downward in a model of the influence of the seven planetary spheres. Indeed, these planets are indicated by the pearls strung on the pendants at their mid-point. I understand this to indicate the influence of the planets upon the soul as it descends to earth, in the astrological accretion on the natal chart of the heavens.¹ Again, the number of the balls in the chevron is sixteen, which is one more than the fifteen that is the number of the full moon - indeed fifteen is one of the sacred numbers of the Goddess as it not only indicates the full, but is composed of the three and five which are her fundamental numbers. These are the three of her trinity and the five of her functions; birth, initiation, passion, sleep, and death. And here we are brought back to the Lunar-goddess as Apple-goddess, as Graves relates: 'For if an apple is halved cross-wise each half shows a five-pointed star in the centre, emblem of

¹ In Neoplatonism, the soul was believed to pick up the particular influence of each planet that it passed in its descent through the spheres, and it was the combination of these individual characteristics that determined the character of the person throughout his or her life on earth.

immortality, which represents the Goddess in her five stations from birth to death and back to birth again. It also represents the planet of Venus - Venus to whom the apple was sacred - adored as Hesper the evening star on one half of the apple, and as Lucifer Son of the Morning on the other'.¹ In a further conflation of ideas, the background is filled with marigolds - indeed the girl is holding one - and the marigold is the flower of Mary: 'What flower is that which bears the Virgin's name, / The richest metal joined with the same?'² It is the flower that follows the sun, the 'winking Mary bud', 'summer's bride', and 'husbandman's dial'.³ Here solar and lunar symbolism are combined, as is also the intended conflation of Mary with Venus as the Lunar-goddess, whom the girl represents in this painting. Again, this painting reflects the paradox of Virginity that we earlier saw expressed in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* - both in respect of Lunar Mary, and in the line from Boccaccio, 'The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself as does the moon'.

In *Bocca Baciata* we see an early example of what will become a recurring motif with Rossetti, the single female figure either surrounded by, or set against a background of flowers.

William Sharp attacked Rossetti's use of flower symbolism, stating that a good painting did not need such pictorial labelling to state its case.⁴ I think that besides this 'labelling', Rossetti employed floral backgrounds for other reasons. For instance they provide for colour and pattern, thus bringing a certain sense of abstraction to the image. They also imply perfume. If the female figure is shown playing an instrument, this provides both a Ficinian and Rosicrucian ideal in the symbolic and magical combination of colour, implied music, and implied scent; in all a harmonic and harmonious icon of the senses. Where his earlier mediaeval watercolour paintings relied upon contained individual symbols, these later paintings are complete symbols in their own right. When Whistler employed musical terms such as 'nocturne', 'symphony', and 'harmony', he was not treading new ground, but rather

¹ *White Goddess*, p.258.

² *The Shepherd's Week* (Monday): *Brewer's*, under 'Marigold'.

³ Baker, *The Folklore of Plants*, p.96. It is used on St Luke's Day (18th Oct.) to invoke dreams of a future lover.

⁴ *DGR*, p.117.

stating what Rossetti's pictures already implied, an inter-reaction of the senses through a single image. Where Rossetti relied upon Renaissance magico-mystical ideas to achieve this, Whistler turned more to the transcendental understatement of Eastern art. While Whistler's art is essentially abstract in that it is detached, objective, and impersonal, Rossetti's paintings are the reverse in that they are designed for the individual to enter into a subjective personal mythological relationship within the frame of the icon. In short, the picture forms an act of invocation of the deity in the purely magical sense.

Paradoxically, it is in the depiction of flowers in these later paintings that Rossetti comes closest to the Preraphaelite creed of Truth to Nature that he had so conspicuously ignored in the days of the Brotherhood. With *Bocca Baciata*, Rossetti took his first step from mediaevalism towards the more sophisticated and sensuous ideas and ideals of the Renaissance in his painting.

One of the most perfect examples of Rossetti's high style is *La Ghirlandata*, 1873¹ (Fig. 47). This painting, as I have pointed out elsewhere,² seems to me to be comparable to Botticelli's *Primavera* in its Ficinian magical content. This sensual image attempts to portray the harmony that pervades the universe: from Beauty comes the music that not only moves the spheres, but also draws the senses into a sympathetic state. The garland of flowers at the head of the harp of the Goddess is composed of her roses of love and the honeysuckle of sexual enticement, and it is the scent of these that pervades not only the picture itself, but is carried down through the lower levels of the material universe by the tones of the harp. This is the same symbolism we saw earlier in the woodcut of Gafurius. These tones are translated into the generation of material growth all around her which symbolise simply *Life*. The blue flowers at the bottom are larkspur, and this was a mistake on Rossetti's part. He had intended them to be monkshood which is deadly poisonous, to show that even in creation there is death, that the giver of life also takes life.³ It also suggests that the lower levels of creation represent death to the soul. William Sharp writes

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 232, plate 334. Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

² Page 285.

³ Ibid: 'it must be intended to have a fateful or deadly purport, as indicated by the prominence given to the blue flowers of the poisonous monkshood. Monkshood this plant was, in Rossetti's intention; but I am informed that he made a mistake (being assuredly far the reverse of a botanist), and figured the innocuous larkspur instead': quoting WMR.

of the painting that 'it deals not with easily-understood domestic sentiment, but with what has to a few special spiritual significance'.¹

A likely source for this painting is Coleridge's *Aeolian Harp*:

Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers, (23)
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!
O the one life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where -
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

And what if all of animated nature (44)
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of All?²

There are two other paintings which convey a similar message. The first is *Venus Verticordia*, 1864-8,³ for which Rossetti also wrote a sonnet. This painting, Rossetti's only large nude figure, shows Venus surrounded by her symbols: roses, honeysuckle, a golden apple in one hand, and a dart of love in the other. On the apple and the dart, and in the light of the halo playing round her head flutter butterflies, which signify the soul. The Greek word for butterfly is Psyche. A blue-bird of love sits on the roses in the upper right hand

¹ *DGR*, pp.229-30.

² *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by HJ Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.28.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 173, plate 248. Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth.

corner. A similar bird is seen in the foliage of *La Ghirlandata*. *Venus Verticordia* is an altogether less successful painting than *La Ghirlandata*, being somewhat crude in concept, composition, and colour, by comparison.¹

The other painting in similar vein is the far more successful *The Beloved (The Bride)*, 1865-6² (Fig.48). This painting is unusual for Rossetti, in that it is the faces of the multiple figures which supply the pattern around the principle figure. The subject of this painting is the Bride of the Canticles. This is somewhat surprising in view of the fact that the Beloved of the Canticles describes herself as 'black, but comely'.³ Burne-Jones' version of the same subject, entitled *Sponsa di Libano (The Bride of Lebanon)*, conceded to this point by depicting the Beloved in a black dress. This blackness is a vitally important symbolic feature, as is that of the wedding itself. In the Canticles, the Bride is black because she represents the fertile earth. This element of fertility is stressed throughout the Song. She is fertile because she has been impregnated (through the symbol of the wedding) by the sun: 'I am black, / Because the sun hath looked upon me'⁴ This is precisely the same symbol I have shown to operate in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, although here it is the blackness that is stressed rather than the whiteness. In the Canticles, the marriage takes place in Spring, amid the revivification of nature:

My beloved spake, and said unto me,
Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
For, lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of the singing of birds is come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;
The fig tree putteth forth her green figs,

¹ Ruskin commented on the 'coarseness' of the flower painting, to which Rossetti replied that 'they are painted with Pre-Raphaelite delicacy'. He continued, 'I suppose he is reflecting upon their morals...but really if one were to listen to scandal about flowers, gardening would become impossible': *ibid.*

² Surtees Cat. no. 182, plate 263. Tate Gallery, London.

³ Song of Songs, 1.5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.6.

And the vines with the tender grape
Give a good smell.¹

The Bride is described as 'A garden enclosed ... Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits'.² The Song also tells us;

This thy stature is like a palm tree,
And thy breasts to clusters of grapes.
I said, I will go up to the palm tree,
I will take hold of the boughs thereof:
Now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine,
And the smell of thy nose like apples.³

The Bride, therefore, is an emblem of Nature symbolised by the palm as the Tree of Life. WB Yeats wrote of *The Bride*, 'in whose face Rossetti saw and painted for once the abundance of earth and not the half-hidden light of his star'.⁴ She is the same figure as the Goddess in *La Ghirlandata*. In that she is the Bride of Lebanon - 'Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, / With me from Lebanon'⁵ - she is ultimately the same figure as Astarte, as I shall show later. Her blackness 'is an image that was always associated with the Great Goddess: Isis, Cybele, Demeter and Artemis'.⁶ Thus, if the Bride is the Earth, the Groom must be the Sun, and this is shown in the Song by a fine metaphor of the sun shining, surrounded by the darkness of the heavens: 'His head is as the most fine gold, / His locks are bushy, and black as a raven'.⁷ We should note how closely this image corresponds with Rossetti's line in *The Hill Summit*: 'A fiery bush with coruscating hair'.

¹ Ibid, 2.10-13.

² Ibid, 4.12-13. 'A garden enclosed' is also a vision of the original Garden of Eden. Rossetti shows us his version of this in *The Blessed Damsel*.

³ Ibid, 7.7-8.

⁴ 'The Happiest of the Poets', in *Essays and Introductions*, p.56.

⁵ Song of Songs, 4.8.

⁶ Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p.480.

⁷ Song of Songs, 5.11.

In *Purgatory*, Canto XXX, Dante describes how Beatrice is brought forth like the Bride; 'And one, as if Heaven prompted that acclaim, / *Veni, sponsa, de Libano* chanted thrice, / And after him all the others cried the same'.¹ In Rossetti's *The Beloved* (*The Bride*), we see the Bride bedecked with the mantle of burgeoning Nature as described in the Song; a negro boy holds her roses, and her attendants, her lilies. Around his neck he wears a golden jewel with eight red stones set in a circle around a central ninth stone: again, compare this with Venus's jewel in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*. I think the black child here acts as a surrogate for the Bride, who should herself be black. Why did Rossetti not portray her as black? Possibly because to do so would simply not have complied with his ethic of beauty, but it may also be that Rossetti, understanding the mythological nature of the Goddess, chose to depict her in an alternative form, that of the Lunar-queen. Rossetti had originally intended this painting to be a Beatrice, but he was not satisfied that the model, Marie Ford, was suitable for his vision of this subject. He was however pleased with his painting of the head, and commented in a letter to Ellen Heaton, for whom the projected subject was intended, 'I have got my model's bright complexion, which was irresistible'.² On turning to the Song of Solomon as a suggested alternative, he continues in a later letter that he finds the subject 'indeed far better for the style of head as it is'.³ Thus we see that the 'bright complexion' was considered by Rossetti to be well suited for this theme, despite the blackness described in the text. Indeed, turning again to the text, we find the Beloved also described; 'Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, / Fair as the moon, / Clear as the sun'.⁴

The very theme of the Marriage is of the first importance. Here, the Bride, who is also the Goddess, faces us directly. As she draws back the veil which hides her face, she looks us directly in the eyes. This is a moment of Revelation. It is a sacred moment when the deity discloses herself in the full glory of her true nature. It places us in the position of the bridegroom. A direct and immediate response is required. And it is this that constitutes, at that precise moment, the understanding of union with the deity. It is this union that

¹ Lines 10-12.

² Surtees, loc. cit.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Song, 6.10.

constitutes the Sacred Marriage, and from which the Holy Child will be born. This moment of the Wedding is precisely that which we see Mary experiencing in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, but here, we are not the observer but the participant. This moment of the Wedding is that which constituted the Unveiling of the Goddess and marriage to her in all the Mystery ceremonies in her honour throughout time.

At this moment of unveiling, what is revealed is the true identity of the Bride of Lebanon. She is none other than the Goddess of Rossetti's famous painting *Astarte Syriaca*, 1877 ¹ (Fig.49). A useful starting point is Rossetti's sonnet for the painting:

Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon
Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen
Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune:
And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean
Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.

Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel
All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea
The witnesses of Beauty's face to be:
That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell
Amulet, talisman, and oracle, -
Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery.

We should note that this sonnet both starts and finishes with the word 'mystery', - it is literally 'wrapped in mystery' - suggesting that the image of the painting is a revelation of the Goddess in the true tradition of the Mystery religions.

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 249, plate 371. Manchester City Art Gallery.

The 'mystery', we are told, as indeed we are shown in the painting, is that Astarte stands between the sun and the moon. Like the Goddess in *La Ghirlandata*, she is accompanied by two flanking angels, so that she forms a trinity. We should note how this also conforms with the figure of Beatrice as Rossetti portrays her in *The Salutation*. Above the figure of Astarte the sun and moon are figured in conjunction, similar to the symbolic union of the marriage of sun and moon in *The Beloved*. Here, though, the implication is that the sun and moon both belong to Astarte, in the manner in which the Goddess is often shown in ancient artefacts.¹ Comment has often been made about the burly, even masculine, appearance of Astarte in this painting.² The head appears too small for the body, and this has been attributed to Rossetti's distorted perception under the influence of chloral. I believe that the figure is meant to convey both masculine and feminine aspects in one, as symbolised by both the sun and moon above her. Wigston writes: 'she personified the earth ... [and] her opposite or male side (for all these great goddesses were androgynous), represented Light or the Sun'.³ This is similar in symbolism to the ambiguously feminine aspect of Christ as Hunt painted him in *The Light of the World*. The figure here is still obviously feminine, because I think it would have been beyond Rossetti's conception of Truth (in the form of Beauty) to have painted her otherwise, but the hint of the union of sexes is enough. This, I suggest, is the essential 'mystery', that stands between the sun and moon. What Rossetti intends by this, I believe, is that this Figure of the Goddess is the *axis mundi*, about whom the great cycles of the generative drive of the universe revolve, and that all creation stems from her. We note directly placed above her head, as though stemming from it, a red circular device in the centre of which is a red eight-pointed star. At the centre of this is an indefinite core which seems to assume the shape of a heart. This symbol is at once that for

¹ An interesting seal is shown in Campbell's *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, p.71 (Baring and Cashford, p.114), which shows the Goddess as Life and Death, sitting beneath the Tree of Life, with the sun and moon above her. In Egyptian art, the head-dress of Isis is traditionally composed of the horns of the white lunar cow in which the sun is cradled. Baring and Cashford illustrate on p.44 a second century BC Babylonian statuette of Astarte with the crescent moon on her head.

² B & J Dobbs, *DGR*, p.209, write: 'she is a formidable icon indeed; her arms and shoulders are not far short of strapping, her dark hair frames her proportionally small face like a cowl and her impossibly large lips are fully "love-freighted"'. They note the 'essentially Romantic distortions of [her] physical features', and suggest 'It is as if chloral had released him from the timidity of form of his early water-colours and enabled him freely to express on canvas his deep-seated fears of sex and women'. Faxon, *DGR*, p.191, writes: 'The proportions are almost Mannerist, with a small head on a massive and elongated body.'

³ Bacon, *Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, p.131.

Venus and the eight-pointed Rose-Cross. In the sonnet's sixth line, 'And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean', we see a direct connection to Rossetti's drawing of Jane entitled *The Roseleaf*.¹ The implication of both this line of the sonnet and the drawing is that it is the head of the Goddess / Jane that is the flower - the bloom of the Rose. In the sonnet, it is the eyes and lips, Rossetti's symbols of Love, 'that wean / The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune'. And the particular sphere is of course the sphere of Venus. Thus we have the correspondence Rose / Love / Venus (as both Goddess and the star).

The figure of the Goddess in the painting takes the pose of the Venus in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. The nakedness of Botticelli's Venus represents 'naked Truth', but here Rossetti clothes his Goddess - the Truth remains hidden. Both Rossetti's and Botticelli's Venus have their hands in the same position, at the groin and at the breast. Although this pose is known as the Pudic ('modest') Venus, who attempts to cover her shame, in mythological terms the groin and the breast relate strictly to fertility.² We may modify this interpretation slightly to indicate the dual nature of Venus, or rather the nature of Plato's two Venus's. The groin refers to the generative aspect of Earthly, or Lower Venus (Venus Dione), while the breast indicates the seat of the heart, which is influenced by divine beauty.³ The position of the breast may also refer to the higher nature of Venus Urania. (Presumably the latter is a reference to the spurt of milk from the breast of Rhea⁴ that created the Milky Way - Urania meaning 'heavenly'. The word 'galaxy' derives from the Greek *gala*, or *galaktos*, meaning milk.) This figures in Rossetti's sonnet as the 'silver sheen' of 'her twofold girdle', that is, the upper and lower functions of Venus, represented by the sky and sea, or, symbolically, spirit and matter. The girdle of Astarte in the painting is composed of roses and pomegranates; that is, the roses of Love, and the pomegranates of immortality, which indicate that Love is immortal. The pomegranate, connected to

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 215, plate 309. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

² Campbell, in *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, p.44, writes, 'The entire ancient world, from Asia Minor to the Nile and from Greece to the Indus Valley, abounds in figurines of the naked female form, in various attitudes, of the all-supporting, all-including goddess: her two hands offering her breasts; her left pointing to her genitals and the right offering her left breast', etc.

³ This notion is born out by Rossetti's sonnet for the picture: 'Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon / Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune'.

⁴ Rhea was the mother of Zeus, and daughter of Uranus. Graves notes in *Greek Myths*, p.41, 'Rhea...may be equated with Dione, or Diana, the Triple-goddess of the Dove and Oak cult'.

Proserpine through Hades, is also an earth-symbol, and here the correspondence is that of darkness, the earth and the heavens both being that dark area of mystery which brings forth the regeneration of the soul in heaven, and the body from the earth. She is *rosa mundi*, who briefly blooms and dies in a season on earth, and who is also the immortal and eternal Rose of Heaven. These again are the higher and lower functions of the Goddess. This is expressed in Rossetti's sonnet: she is the Rose that 'from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean[s]', and it is through her higher influence that Love ('The pulse of hearts') is drawn upwards to the higher good by 'the spheres' dominant tune'. This is the tune played by the Goddess in *La Ghirlandata*. The same idea is also present in Rossetti's painting of *The Blessed Damozel*.

The Goddess as we see her in *Astarte Syriaca* now conforms to the quotation from the Canticles that I earlier left unfinished:

Who is she that looketh forth as the morning,
Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
And terrible as an army with banners?

The question here relates to the 'mystery' in Rossetti's sonnet. We have seen why she is both solar and lunar, but why as 'terrible as an army with banners'? This is certainly how Rossetti shows her. To portray a Goddess is not easy; neither is it to confront one face to face. In *The Beloved* she wore the face of passive Beauty, but here that Beauty has about it a degree of terror and certainly sovereignty. The Goddess is pictured here in a darkness that is lit by the twin orbs of the sun and moon, and the twin torches of the attendant angels. This painting expresses many of the qualities found in the sonnets of *The House of Life*, heavy, close, enigmatic, mysterious, and dark. Darkness here is a theme, as in these lines from Sonnet 27, *Heart's Compass*: 'All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art; / Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above'. In Sonnet 58, *True Woman III, Her Heaven*, he has the phrase, 'Sky-spaces of her eyes'. And, as Bruno writes, 'there are two stars in the form of two radiant eyes':

Thou dost torment, by hiding from my view
 Those lovely lights beneath the beauteous lids.
 Therefore the troubled sky's no more serene,
 Nor hostile baleful shadows fall away.¹

In short, the twin lights of the Goddess are her eyes shining in heaven. These are the sun and moon, symbolically represented in the painting by the two torches. For Rossetti and Bruno, these eyes shed light and cast away 'baleful shadows'. For the ancients, however, these lights were not so benign. Astarte, like Diana, was the huntress of the mountains, and these lights were the very eyes of the huntress. This is the dark, destructive aspect of the Goddess as she seeks her prey. Lilith, as we shall see, shares this symbolism, characterised as she is by the owl. This symbolism is also shared by Athene: the owl is on the bright side wisdom, and on the dark side, the night hunter. These are like the two sides of Rossetti's coin in *The Sonnet*. The goddess Ishtar, or Inanna, another name for Astarte, was known as 'Divine Lady Owl'.² She was also known as 'The Maiden' and 'Lady of the Mountain',³ who by night pursued her prey through the mountain tops. We can see that a similar symbolism here applies to the various forms of the Lunar-goddess. Hecate, for instance (in Blake's picture of whom the night-owl is prominently displayed), traditionally carries two torches as she hunts through the mountains at night. Sophocles similarly describes Artemis as 'smiter of the deer, goddess of the two-fold torch'.⁴ The twin torches represent her eyes. These torches are apparent in *Astarte Syriaca*.

¹ *Heroic Enthusiasts*, II, 28.

² Baring and Cashford, p.216. A striking image of the Goddess in this role, dating from 2300-2000 BC, is to be found on p.217. Apuleius refers to 'dread Proserpine to whom the owl cries at night': *Golden Ass*, p.269. The Lunar-goddess, as Apuleius reminds us, goes under a bewildering variety of names (p.271): 'I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements'. Asherah, Anath, Ashtoreth, and Astarte are the Canaanite counterparts of the Mesopotamian Inanna and Ishtar, and also the Egyptian Isis. The evolution and relationship of these deities are examined in detail in Baring and Cashford.

³ Campbell op. cit., p.45 (Baring and Cashford, fig.27, p.123), shows a seal illustrating the Goddess of the Mountain as the *axis mundi*.

⁴ Baring and Cashford, p.328. See the 'Hymn to Artemis', pp.320-21, which celebrates (if this is the right word) the night chase of the 'deer huntress' Artemis through the 'mountains of shadow / and peaks of wind', with her 'bow / of solid gold'. Note the description of her as 'she of the beautiful hair'. 'Hecate - "Queen of Night", as the poet Sappho calls her - wears a bright headband and carries two torches in her

The two torches here represent two symbolic ideas. Firstly, like the eyes of the owl, they are hunters after the wisdom that is hidden in darkness; this is their true prey. The darkness, which is ignorance, is illuminated by the light of the Goddess. Thus, they are like the twin lights set up by God in Genesis, ‘the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also’.¹ So, the sun and moon behind Astarte’s head in the painting are represented by the blazing torch held on each side of her by the angels. The star is her own: ‘An eight rayed star ... the image of the planet we now call Venus’.² This symbol is repeated on the frame of the painting, where it appears at the centre of square motifs which suggest the Celtic or Rosicrucian cross.

There is, however, a deeper meaning to this image, and here we must return to the Song of Songs. Solomon asks his Bride to

Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse,
With me from Lebanon:
Look from the top of Amana,
From the top of Shenir and Hermon,
From the lion’s dens...³

In I Kings 3.2-3, it is stated, ‘Only the people sacrificed in high places, because there was no house built unto the name of the Lord, until those days. And Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father: only he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places’. In the Song of Solomon, 4.6., it is written, ‘I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, /And to the hill of frankincense’. The implication here is that Solomon was worshipping in the high places sacred to the Goddess Astarte.⁴ In I Kings 11. 4-5, it is

hands as the brilliant eyes of the dark, an image, perhaps, of intuition that sees the shapes of things not yet visible’: p.328.

¹ Gen. I.16.

² Baring and Cashford, p.175. ‘Just above her brow shone a round disc, like a mirror, or like the bright face of the moon, which told me who she was’: Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, p.270. See also the illustration of the priestess of Isis in Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p.123.

³ Song of Songs, 4.8. The goddess is often depicted in conjunction with a lion, as in the illustrations of Astarte /Ashtoreth and Inanna / Ishtar, in Baring and Cashford, pp.459 and 217.

⁴ See Baring and Cashford, p.462.

written: 'For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians'.¹

Ashtoreth is another name for Astarte. It seems clear that Solomon went to the mountains of Lebanon and brought back Astarte as his symbolic Bride. The symbol of Lebanon is its fragrant cedar, and it is this tree (see Brown's *Our Ladye of Saturday Night*, and the related pine in Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*), which is the symbol of the Goddess. Graves writes:

No mention has been made so far of the religious meaning of the cedar, which figures so prominently in the Old Testament as the loftiest and grandest of all trees: 'even the cedars of Libanus which Thou hast planted.' It was used by Solomon with the 'choice fir' ['The beams of our house are cedar, / And our rafters of fir: Song, 1.17.] in the building of the three contiguous temples which he raised in honour of a Trinity consisting of Jehovah and two Goddesses. The identity of the second of these temples is disguised by Pharisee editors as 'the House of the Forest of Lebanon', meaning the temple of the Mountain-goddess, the Love and Battle goddess of Midsummer; that of the third is disguised as 'The House of Pharaoh's daughter', who is shown by the story of Moses to have been the Birth-goddess of the Winter Solstice. Since we know that the fir was sacred to the Birth-goddess and that the floor of the Temple was of fir planking, it follows that the cedar of the pillars and beams was sacred to the Love-and-Battle goddess of Mount Lebanon, Astarte or Anatha.²

¹ "There can be little doubt", writes Patai, "that it was the worship of Asherah, already popular among the Hebrews for several generations, which was introduced by Solomon into Jerusalem as part of the cult of the royal household, for his Sidonian wife." Ibid.

² *The White Goddess*, p.338. The pine and the fir are the same tree. For details of the 'House of the Lord', see I Kings 6-7, which contains frequent references to the trees used in the Temple: cedar, fir, olive, palm, and pomegranate. 7.13 tells of Hiram of Tyre, the 'widow's son' upon whom the Masonic myth centres, and his erection of the pillars Jachin and Boaz, 7.21. A most useful interpretation of the of the Goddess's habitation within the Temple is given in Baring and Cashford, pp.449-454.

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much... And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. ... And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall. I Kings 4.29-33.

Not only did Solomon bring the Goddess from Lebanon, but he also installed her in the Temple. Baring and Cashford describe her function there:

As the image of the Tree of Life, she stood in the temples and groves of Canaan and was worshipped as the Giver of Life. Many of her images, called *asherim*,¹ were made of carved wood and were set up next to the altar in the temples, or in a grove of trees nearby, or on shrines on hill-tops or 'high places', sacred to the goddess here as they were in Crete. One image stood for many centuries in the great Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.²

Indeed we have already noted her function as the Tree of Life in the Canticles, where in 7.7-8, it is written,

This thy stature is like to a palm tree,
And thy breasts to clusters of grapes.
I said, I will go up to the palm tree,
I will take hold of the boughs thereof:
Now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine,
And the smell of thy nose like apples.

In 8.5, we meet with an image already familiar to us:

I raised thee up under the apple tree:
There thy mother brought thee forth:

¹ This word derives from Asherah, a local name of the universal Goddess.

² Op. cit., p.454.

There she brought thee forth that bare thee.

Thus the image of the pagan fertility goddess was set up as the Tree of Life in the Temple of Solomon itself. We should understand that Solomon was the earthly representative of the Lord, who married the Goddess - symbolically she was the bride of the Solar-king Yahweh, and shared his temple.

In Rossetti's painting the two torches are shown to have plants growing round them. The left-hand one, the one under the sun, has a spiral growth up it: the right-hand one, under the moon, has the plant trailing down from its top. These represent vegetable increase, on the left, and the death of vegetable life, on the right; the waxing and waning of the solar year. Graves tells us how this symbolism relates to the Temple of Solomon:

Solomon's Temple as rebuilt by Zerubbabel on the original Phoenician model, the spirally fluted pillars correspond with Boaz, Solomon's right-hand pillar dedicated to growth and the waxing sun; the vertically fluted with Jachin, his left-hand pillar dedicated to decay and the waning sun.¹

He adds that at some later date, the order of the pillars became reversed. The pillars, Graves states, 'represented respectively the sun and the moon. The Freemasons seem to have borrowed this tradition.'²

I turn now to two related paintings; *Lady Lilith*, and *Sibylla Palmifera*. These complementary paintings, and their accompanying sonnets, *Body's Beauty* and *Soul's Beauty*, show two distinct aspects of the Goddess in Rossetti's art. I shall start by looking

¹ *White Goddess*, p189, note 2.

² *Ibid*, p.119. Particularly fine examples of these two pillars are to be found at Rosslyn Chapel, Lothian. This chapel is dedicated to the fertility myth and contains numerous examples of the Green Man, the Spirit of Nature. Ruskin did a watercolour painting of the chapel at Rosslyn. It is of interest to note that some Masonic certificates, besides depicting the two pillars, also depict the two blazing torches, exactly as has Rossetti in this painting: see King, *Magic: The Western Tradition*, plate 60 (at the top).

at *Lady Lilith*, painted in 1868 ¹ (Fig.50). The sonnet which Rossetti composed for the painting became Sonnet 78, *Body's Beauty*, of *The House of Life*. The painting shows Lilith, 'Adam's first wife ... / (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve)', reclining and dressed in white while she admires herself in a hand-mirror as she combs her hair against a deeply dark background. We shall see that the symbolism of this whiteness is the same as that of Mary in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, although the figure of Lilith is the complete antithesis of Mary. William offers a strangely defensive caveat: 'There is thus in the picture not anything ... to indicate a deep occult meaning of any kind'.² Elsewhere he writes, 'Into *Venus Astarte* he had put his utmost intensity of thinking, feeling, and method ... an ideal of the mystery of beauty, offering a sort of combined quintessence of what he had endeavoured in earlier years to embody in the two several types of *Sibylla Palmifera* and *Lilith*'.³ This comment is more revealing, for it tells us that we might expect to find here a schizophrenic rendering of the same symbolism we noted in *Astarte Syriaca*.

Lady Lilith depicts a lunar-goddess floating in the darkness of an inky heaven. This is further reinforced by the fact that she is shown using the twin symbols of Aphrodite, the mirror and the comb. Indeed, Lilith is intended to be read as a lunar-goddess, but here she differs from Mary.

The lunar triad consists of three distinct stages which are represented by three colours: the first is that of the Old Woman, the Hag, whose colour is black. She represents Death, the dark earth, the womb in which new life germinates. Like Kali, she is not only the destroyer, but the darkness in which new life is formed. She is Hecate and the Black Virgin. The next stage is the white, the Maiden, the perpetual and self-renewing virgin. She is the Huntress, Artemis, the death-and-mountain goddess whose aspect we have noted in *Astarte*. The third stage is the red of the Mother / Lover, the goddess of fertility and plenty. She is Demeter, Isis, Aphrodite, Mary. She is the bringer forth of life, the giver. This triplicity is also represented by three planetary bodies: the black earth from which life is

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 205, plate 293. Delaware Art Museum: Samuel and Mary R Bancroft Memorial Collection.

² *Designer and Writer*, p.63. He was no doubt referring to the element of witchcraft inherent in the theme.

³ *Ibid*, p.99.

born and into which it returns in death, the white orb of the self-renewing virgin moon, and the red star of Love that is Venus. Again, this trinity is expressed through the phases of the moon; the virgin sickle of the new moon (Artemis, Diana, Mary Virgin), the full orb of the mature moon (Venus, Isis, Mary Mother, etc.), and the hag of the old sickle moon, which includes the blackness of the three interlunar days (Hecate, Proserpine, Mary of the Pieta, etc.). This trinity also reflects the three-fold divisions of the agricultural year: the autumnal reaping (the death of the Corn-king) and the sowing of the seed which germinates in darkness; the regeneration of Spring; and the mature golden corn-fields of high-summer. In these two paintings, Rossetti has condensed this triad into two images: *Lady Lilith* is a combination of the black and the white, and *Sibylla Palmifera* combines the red and the black.

Rossetti shows Lilith contemplating herself in her hand-mirror, just as the moon looks down on the water below, such as Lake Nemi, called by the ancients 'Diana's Mirror'. The black back of the mirror held by Lilith is the circular dark side of the moon, or the dead three-day phase out of which the virgin crescent rises.¹ The combing of the hair may appear vanity - indeed the whole image appears to be one of vanity (the mirror being a 'vanity mirror') - for the self-possessed, self-contained goddess. But an important alternative may be suggested. In the sonnet, Rossetti tells us 'her enchanted hair was the first gold', and the image of it flowing out from her head suggests the rays of the sun, the 'coruscating hair' of Pheobus.² Rossetti may depict Lilith as the original Goddess who was both sun and moon, as I earlier suggested of Astarte.³ Rossetti pictures the 'coruscating hair' flowing out from the head of Lilith towards the two mirrors, where the light is reflected back to Lilith from the handmirror (which now itself takes the part of the moon), and to the large mirror in the background where it is reflected out to illuminate and fertilise

¹ The mirror Rossetti has depicted bears a remarkable resemblance to the 'black scrying stone' of Dr John Dee, illustrated in Raine, *Yeats the Initiate*, p.92. Whether Rossetti knew of this object, it is impossible to say: however, Dee's 'dreaming stone' provided the basis for the beryl stone in *Rose Mary*, as described by Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of DGR and his Circle*, p.53.

² Sonnet 70, *The Hill Summit*, line eight.

³ This interpretation redefines the traditional symbols of Aphrodite. They do not simply represent her beauty and vanity, but perform a symbolic function. The comb (itself a symbol of solar rays) is the instrument that separates her solar hair into streaming 'coruscating' rays, and the mirror, the instrument of self-reflection, represents the moon which reflects back the solar beauty. This we have already noted in the 'Hymn to Artemis'; 'she of the beautiful hair'.

Nature. This seems a difficult and awkward piece of symbolism, but it does provide for the 'greater' and 'lesser' lights of the sun and moon. They are also the two lights of Astarte's eyes, and the two candles in front of the large mirror displaying Nature represent both these two lights and the twin torches in *Astarte Syriaca*.

Lilith, like Mary in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, is the young virgin moon awaiting her fulfilment. But unlike Mary, she is vain, self-possessed, and cruel. On the reverse of the watercolour version of the subject¹, Rossetti inscribed these lines from Goethe:

Beware of her hair, for she excels
All women in the magic of her locks
And when she twines them round a young man's neck
She will not ever set him free again.²

Rossetti expresses the same thought in the second half of the octave of *Body's Beauty*:

And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

This suggests that she is indeed the Goddess to whom the Year-king will be sacrificed. FG Stephens writes of her 'seated as if she lived now':

The haughty luxuriousness of the beautiful witch's face, the tale of a cold soul amid all its charms, does not belie, such was the art of the master in painting it, the fires of a voluptuous physique. She has passion without love, and languor without satiety - energy without heart, and beauty without tenderness or sympathy for others - for her lovers least of all.³

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 205 D, R.1. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

² Ibid.

³ *DGR*, pp.68-9.

Lilith, in this conception, is the eternal siren of femininity, perpetually self-renewing, and always luring man to entrancement. For once Rossetti is not adhering to the Platonic maxim in Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn* - 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' - but recognises rather *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Rossetti writes: 'The idea which you indicate (viz. of the perilous principle in the world being female from the first) is about the most essential notion of the sonnet'.¹ The nature of man is for ever to be entranced, enthralled, by the *idea* of the feminine, which is forever young. To show this Rossetti places a foxglove on her dressing table / altar to express her authority over the hearts of men. Rossetti recognises the mythological lunar character of Lilith in the line, 'And still she sits, young while the earth is old'. Femininity, - or more precisely, sexuality in the feminine, - like the moon, is always self-renewing and young. This re-iterates the lines from Boccaccio; 'The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon'. In a Platonic sense, this idea is one of doom - that is, lust, and the soul's consequent enchainment to matter - and a symptom of loving wrongly, which Rossetti expresses in Sonnet 54, *Love's Fatality*. This message finds its counterbalance in *Soul's Beauty*, as we shall shortly see.

Lilith's sexuality is well expressed in the painting, although, as Surtees relates this suffered somewhat 'when Rossetti repainted it at Kelmscott, [and] the head of Alexa Wilding was substituted, with disastrous consequences'.² As she states, the painting now hardly relates to Stephens' description quoted above, although some idea of the original, for which Fanny Cornforth was the model, may be gained from the watercolour version. However, Lilith's beauty, as Stephens states, is a cold beauty. It is a lunar beauty that can never be reached or defiled. Really, as she gazes at herself in the mirror, it is herself that she truly loves. But in order that Nature in the mirror flourishes, she cannot remain in this state; she must at some stage take a lover.

I have earlier shown that Astarte and Lilith are the original forms of the Goddess who rules both sun and moon, and through them Nature. Here, Lilith does appear to be both

¹ *Letters*, II, 850, letter 992, to Dr Gordon Hake, 21st April 1870.

² Cat. no. 205.

solar and lunar. When first assessing this painting, I assumed that the male aspect, in the form of sunlight, was coming from outside the picture area, as in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*. Indeed, this painting also contains the clear glass vessel (better seen in the watercolour version) containing the red rose, which symbolises the pure vessel of the Virgin through which will pass the fertilising rays of the sunlight of the solar deity. The red ribbon around her wrist which trails onto her white dress seems to indicate loss of virginity. This idea is reinforced by the displaced wreath of white flowers in her lap. The gold surround to the keyhole on her dressing-table / altar is also an obvious sexual reference.

But, most importantly, is this impregnation being done by an outside solar force as I first assumed? The white roses in the background, hanging like stars in the firmament, are changing slowly from white to red, or at least, have a red blush to them, the last one of which, entering the mirror-image of Nature, is totally red. These appear to represent Lilith also, but the vital point is that (as blooms at this stage do), *they change by themselves*. The red form of the rose is the vital form that represents sexuality and reproduction, which is why it crosses into the mirror-image of material Nature. Lilith whose 'enchanted hair was the first gold' is both solar and lunar in herself, and as such is totally self-contained. The idea of the Virgin as Vessel is repeated on the dressing table / altar in the shape of the silver egg-shaped container which is topped by a crown-shaped ornamental handle. The egg-shape is itself a symbol of fertility. This replicates Lilith herself, white topped by gold. Thus Lilith is indicated to be the Vessel of the Grail, upon which all Nature depends.

This pair of paintings is a rare example in which Rossetti does not portray the Goddess adorned by the usual green dress of Nature. Here Rossetti shows us the underlying form of the Goddess, but one which is still veiled by clothing, thus still not expressing the 'naked Truth' of her being. This picture is strangely undefined: a strange ambiguity exists as to whether the setting is an interior or an exterior. The furnishings lead us to believe that we are seeing the Goddess indoors, but the spray of roses set against the darkness gives the disorientating impression that we are also outdoors. I think a strange and not altogether happy symbolism is implied in this: the Goddess looks into the mirror in the internalisation of self-reflection in the same way as the viewer looks into the dark room from outside. Thus the darkness represents the interior of Lilith. The outside, as shown by the large

mirror, is as bright as is Lilith herself externally. The green dress of Nature is thus here symbolised by what we see reflected in the mirror; that is, outside. The green dress of Nature as the true drape of the Goddess is implied in this exteriorisation. Here she is expressed as her true lunar self floating brightly in the dark void of the abyss, and this darkness also represents the darkness of the Self, the subconscious, which is the interior form implied by the hand-mirror. Thus Nature stands for the exteriorisation of the subconscious, the seeming chaos of the inner Self materialised in the outer. For the moon is agent of material Nature, just as the feminine is also its representative. So, if I have made myself clear, we here look simultaneously *in* at the outer form of Lilith, as we also look *out* from her inner form. This is the paradox of self-reflection as implied by the hand-mirror. This operates on two levels: the viewer looking into the painting, and Lilith looking into the mirror. Thus we see light in darkness with the implication of darkness in light. This, I think, is the essential paradox of this image. If I am right, this is a typical Rosicrucian enigma.¹

Having examined the exterior implications of the painting, we might now turn to some other correspondences attached to the figure of Lilith. In the section on Astarte, I related how the screech owl was symbolic of her nature as night-hunter and destroyer; the same applies to Lilith. Isaiah 34.13-15 records the desolation that will follow the vengeance of God:

And thorns shall come up in her [Zion's] palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses thereof: and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls. ... the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest. There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow.

Graves writes; 'the same owl that occurs on the coins of Athens as the symbol of Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, [is] the same owl that gave its name to Adam's first wife Lilith'.² He notes elsewhere that 'the Lilim, or Children of Lilith, [were] the devotees of the Hebrew

¹ Both Fludd and Jennings write on this; it is the essential paradox Rossetti illustrates with the double-sided nature of the coin in *The Sonnet*.

² *White Goddess*, p.315.

Owl-goddess, who was Adam's first wife'.¹ Thus we find a series of links: wisdom - owl - Lilith as screech owl - Astarte as 'Divine Lady Owl' - Astarte in Solomon's Temple - Wisdom of Solomon. In that the Goddess, in the form of Astarte, was the symbolic wife of Solomon, it would be fair to conclude that she was also the symbolic 'Wisdom of Solomon'.

Emblematically, Lilith as the first wife of Adam, was the original Goddess of Eden. The use of the term 'wife' in this sense is to describe the consort of the Sacred King. The King was inferior to his wife / Goddess during this period, and was sacrificed to her on a periodical basis. Thus Lilith / Astarte, or whatever name the Goddess goes under, was the original deity who was the support of Life in the Sacred Garden. She was symbolised, as we have earlier seen, by the Tree. Just as Astarte was the emblematic Queen of Solomon's Song, so was Lilith the sacred Bride of Adam.² As the god Jehovah became the supreme patriarchal Godhead of Judah, the earlier Goddess was cast out - as we have seen in Isaiah - into the desert where she spawns devils. As Graves points out, 'Demons and bogeys are invariably the reduced gods or priests of a superseded religion'.³

In Hebrew tradition, Lilith was created along with Adam, from the earth; she was not created out of him.⁴ She was thus his equal, and in her independence, would not submit to him. She was disobedient, and would not lie beneath him for intercourse. In a fit of rage, she uttered the sacred, unspeakable name of God, and rushed into the wilderness where she gave birth to hordes of demons.

What is the significance of this? How did she know the sacred name of God, and why should her speaking it have such consequences?⁵ The answer is that this was a struggle for

¹ Ibid, p.220, fn.3. continued from the previous page.

² An interesting point is found in Greek mythology in that the transition from a matriarchy to a patriarchy was no sudden event, but a gradual process, during which the male deities became the partners in marriage to the goddess-figures who had previously ruled alone and supreme. In the point in question, though, both Adam and Solomon are obviously examples of the earlier concept of the Year King who marries the Goddess for the sake of the fertility of the land.

³ *White Goddess*, p.219, fn.3.

⁴ Here we may understand Lilith to be an incarnation of the Earth-goddess out of whom Adam (along with all men) was born and to whom all will ultimately return as 'dust to dust'.

⁵ There is a similar incident in the mythology of Isis who asked, 'Cannot I by means of the sacred name of God make myself mistress of the earth and become a goddess of like rank and power to Ra in heaven and upon earth?': Baring and Cashford, p.265. This is another example of the 'word of power' discussed earlier.

power. The Goddess was the original deity inhabiting Eden until usurped by Jehovah. Graves shows¹ that the name Yahweh or Jehovah was originally derived from the name of the Goddess, and so Lilith's knowledge and utterance of this name is in a sense a handing over of her divine power before she fled in defeat. The knowledge of a name in mythology gives the possessor power over the owner, and it is in this sense that Lilith is driven out of Eden by the usurping Jehovah. This is the reason why the vowel sounds of God's name were forbidden to be uttered and it was reduced to the tetragrammaton JHWH - the unspeakable name of God.

The great abomination of Lilith as the Goddess was her sexuality. We have already seen in the Song of Solomon that the Sacred Marriage was also a fertility rite, and these rites were once the common practice of all ancient cultures around the Mediterranean basin. These rites invariably resulted in orgiastic couplings to ensure the fertility of land, crops, herds, and humans. In the Grail legends, we see the result on the land when the King is impotent. Astarte is the original Whore of Babylon where ritual prostitution was practised in her temples, which the Israelites abhorred during their captivity in that land. It is altogether possible that Mary Magdalene was a priestess of the Lunar-goddess, and from the symbolism that we earlier explored in Rossetti's *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, it seems that this may have been how he understood her.

Lilith appears in Blake's engraving of the statue of *Laocoon*. In 1815, Blake executed some engravings for Rees' Encyclopaedia, among which was an illustration of the Greek statue. Blake later altered this plate, using it as a vehicle for some of his more obscure spiritual ideas, which altogether expanded and altered the meaning of the image.² The plate has not survived, and only one print remains in existence. The plate was retitled by Blake, in Hebrew script, *Jah and His Two Sons, Satan and Adam, as They Were Copied from the Cherubim of Solomon's Temple by Three Rhodians, and Applied to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium*. The serpent on the right, biting one of the sons is called Evil; the serpent on the left, biting the father Jah(weh) is called Good, and underneath in Hebrew, Lilith. Here Lilith is equated with a serpent as she is in Rossetti's *Eden Bower*. She seems to be

¹ Op. cit., pp.337-8.

² The aphorisms engraved on this plate may be found in Blake, *Poems and Prophecies*, pp.287-290.

biting back in revenge at the God who usurped her place in Eden. In *Eden Bower*, she takes out her revenge upon Adam through Eve and her now prohibited apple of wisdom and immortality. What is also of importance here is Blake's linking of these ideas with Solomon's Temple.

Writing after Rossetti's lifetime, but in the same tradition, Graves has this passage in his novel *King Jesus*: 'The Moon has many names among our poets. She is Lilith and Eve and Ashtaroth and Rahab and Tamar and Leah and Rachel and Michal and Anatha; but she is Miriam when her star rises in love from the salt sea at evening'.¹

The position in which Rossetti depicts Lilith appears to be a direct reversal (or mirror-image) of Venus in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*.² We should note that both goddesses are dressed in white, and that Botticelli's Venus has a similar air of detached self-containment having overcome and sent to sleep the Spring-god Mars.³ This reversal of image also occurs in Rossetti's *Monna Vanna*, which is but a draped elaboration of Titian's *Flora* in the Uffizi.

The element of sleep with which Venus has subdued Mars is also a significant point in Rossetti's sonnet *Body's Beauty*. Although the lover is not shown in *Lady Lilith*, we know that 'Sleep the brother of Death'⁴ is present:

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?

Here again is the motif of the *mors osculi*. It is at this point that the theme passes directly to the painting *Sibylla Palmifera* (Fig. 51) and the accompanying Sonnet 77, *Soul's Beauty*.

¹ Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (London: Arena, 1989), p.21. This work places Christ firmly in the context of Middle-Eastern mythologies, so often ignored when Christianity is discussed in isolation.

² National Gallery, London.

³ Before he assumed his war-like nature, Mars was the annual Spring-god who gave his name to the early month of the year March. Knowledge of this seems reflected in Botticelli's painting, for Venus is undoubtedly depicted as the Lunar-queen to whom he has been sacrificed. I believe this is how Rossetti also understood the painting, and that *Lady Lilith* was his own version on the same theme.

⁴ It is possible that this may indicate a practice of drugging the Year-king before he goes to meet his sacrificial death. The poppy is the source of opium.

It is here that we encounter the other aspect of the Goddess: if Lilith can be described as the external brightness, here we find the hidden dark interior in which we encounter the Mystery of the Goddess. In all these paintings, it is the viewer who becomes the lover of the Goddess: it is the viewer who replaces Mars in Botticelli's painting; the viewer who is enthralled with Lilith and enticed to sleep - that is, sacrificed, - by her charms. This is the last image of *Body's Beauty*: 'so went / Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent / And round his heart one strangling golden hair.' This image reminds one of the death-cult of Kali, in which the victim is strangled with a yellow silken scarf. Whether by sleep or death, the viewer is transported and awakens to the scene in *Sibylla Palmifera* as described in *Soul's Beauty*:

Under the arch of Life, where love and death,
Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw
Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,
I drew it in as simply as my breath.
Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,
The sky and sea bend on thee, - which can draw,
By sea or sky or woman, to one law,
The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise
Thy voice and hand shake still, - long known to thee
By flowing hair and fluttering hem, - the beat
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,
How passionately and irretrievably,
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!

Swinburne's *Ode to the Night* parallels Rossetti's sonnet. In this poem, the Goddess addressed as 'O ancient mother of the holy moon', also takes the form of a Sibyl:

Goddess dark bosomed, from thy mystic cave
Sounds strange and sad we hear,
Unfit for mortal ear! (Line 3)

Beneath thee lies the circling ocean flood,
Above thy head is vaulted the deep sky; (11)

There is a mystery in thine eye! (13)

The mystery of mysteries? (20)

In *A Lamentation*, we find many now-familiar symbols:

Where the dark brings forth light as a flower (St.1)

But dumb the goddesses underground
Wait, and we hear not on earth if their feet
Rise, and the night wax loud with their wings;
Dumb, without word or shadow of sound;
And sift in scales and winnow as wheat
Men's souls, and sorrow of manifold things. (St.3)

Soul's Beauty seems to describe a ritualistic scene of devotion in which Rossetti quite unequivocally dedicates himself to his deity, Lady Beauty. Such an event is described by Baring and Cashford:

The initiate himself becomes the son-lover, whose old beliefs and way of life are sacrificed to his or her new understanding of the Mysteries, and who is 'reborn' from a death-like state of his former level of understanding. The 'Day of Blood' (*Dies Sanguinis*) symbolised the death or sacrifice of the former state. The *Hilaria*,

or day of rejoicing, celebrated the return or ascent of the soul to its source. The child 'born' of the sacred marriage between the initiate and the goddess was at once the image of regenerated life on earth and the initiate's own spiritual regeneration.¹

It seems that the initiation involved a symbolic descent into the underworld into the sacred cave or crypt beneath or beside the temple of Cybele, and here the ceremony of the sacred marriage took place, and from here the initiate was 'reborn' as a 'son or 'daughter' of the goddess.²

The same symbolism is expanded throughout *The House of Life*, the title of which, in this context, seems particularly relevant.

*Soul's Beauty*³ was painted between 1866-70, and Rossetti wrote of it that the conception was 'that of *Beauty the Palm-giver*, i.e., the *Principle of Beauty*, which draws all high-toned men to itself, whether with the aim of embodying it in art, or only of attaining its enjoyment in life'.⁴ 'The title *Palmifera* (*Sibylla* was an afterthought) was adopted, wrote Rossetti, "to mark the leading place which I intend her to hold among my beauties."⁵ The palm is the traditional symbol of Victory, and here the allusion is to the triumph of the spiritual Life of the immortal soul over temporal Death of the body. The palm of *Palmifera* also denotes pilgrimage; a leaf of this tree was traditionally brought back to Europe by pilgrims to the Holy Land as a token of their successful journey. Such pilgrims were known as 'Palmer's'. Here Rossetti transfers the symbol to the Goddess because of his awareness that the palm, as in the Canticles, is the tree sacred to the Goddess. Wigston writes: 'the sacred Tree or Tree of Life is represented by the date palm -

¹ Op. cit., pp.413-14.

² P.415. Here the authors are describing the Mysteries of Cybele, although the Mysteries of Eleusis and elsewhere were presumably of a similar nature. These rituals may well be the source of the Grail legends: 'A tablet dedicated to Cybele has a fish and cup inscribed on it, and it is possible that fish, as well as wine and bread, was the food shared by the initiates, and that it was laid in the sacred cup or vessels which symbolised the goddess herself. The fish, as the spirit of the waters, is one of the oldest images of regenerated life, and fish and cakes were offered to the goddess by her devotees and eaten as her sacred 'body' in Mesopotamia and Syria': *ibid.* These are important Grail symbols and places into context the symbolic importance of the Fisher King.

³ Surtees Cat. no. 193, plate 285. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.

⁴ *Designer and Writer*, p.56.

⁵ WMR, *ibid.*, p.55.

Phoenix dactylifera'.¹ The palm was supposed 'to have sprung from the residue of the clay of which Adam was formed',² and we can see from this the intimate connections that exist within the themes we have been examining.

In this painting we see the Goddess Beauty seated in a dark sanctuary, which, as she is a Sibyl, must be below the earth. The initiation ceremonies of the mystery cults, as we have seen above, invariably involve a symbolic death and a descent into the underworld, as described by Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*;

I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Proserpine's threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the under-world and the gods of the upper-world, stood near and worshipped them.³

Dante's epic journey in the *Divine Comedy* is of course another example of such a journey of the soul. In the quotation above, we again encounter the paradox of light in darkness and darkness in light. The reference to Proserpine is an important one.⁴ Both paintings deal with a confrontation with, and a revelation of, the Earth-goddess in the underworld. Here, 'the Principle of Beauty' as 'Beauty the Palm-giver' refers to the belief that although the physical body suffers death, in the form of sleep, or death itself, or a symbolic death through initiation, that Love conquers death, and it is Lady Beauty in the form of Victory who bestows the palm: 'when the spirit of man passes, to thee it returns. Thou indeed art rightly named Great Mother of the Gods; Victory is in thy divine name'.⁵ Thus the palm here represents Victory over Death.

¹ Bacon, *Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, p.96. He adds, p.97, that the date-palm is understood to be the Tree of Life in Genesis, and that, as a symbol of the year, it was the origin of the Christmas Tree.

² Brewer's, under 'Palm'.

³ P.286.

⁴ I have not included Rossetti's *Proserpine* in this section for two reasons: firstly because we have dealt with the symbolism of the painting in an earlier section, and; secondly because that symbolism which was not dealt with then is adequately covered in the present discussion.

⁵ *White Goddess*, p.73, quoting from a prayer in a twelfth century English herbals. The palm is the symbol of Victory, thus the phrase 'to give the palm', from the Roman custom of giving the victorious gladiator a branch of palm. In *The Golden Ass*, p.270, Isis is described: 'On her divine feet were slippers of palm leaves, the emblem of victory.'

The Sibyl sits within her gloomy sanctuary, and her figure and the column behind her divide the composition into two. On the left-hand side we see a flaming lamp which illuminates the carved figure of blind Love, above whom hangs a garland of red roses. The wand of palm that the Sibyl holds points up to enclose these three symbols. On the right-hand side is a censer from which a wisp of smoke curls up to the carved mask of Death, above which hangs a garland of poppies - 'The rose and poppy are her flowers': 'I and this Love are one, and I am Death'.¹ In the area of light cast upon the column from an unknown source, flutter two butterflies, which symbolise the soul. This was a popular symbol among the ancients for whom the transformation from chrysalis to butterfly was a miraculous event which promised a corresponding transfiguration of man himself. The butterfly is Psyche who was rescued from Hades by Eros.

The burning lamp on the left indicates both the light and life of Love which illuminates; the smoke curling from the censer on the right indicates the extinction of life (fire) and the slow but steady burning which transforms matter, thus releasing its essence, the soul, which is now free to rise up to heaven. This slow, steady, gentle heat is much spoken of in alchemy as the means of transformation; while the fire of passion is fierce it cannot be sustained, and thus must be guarded against. These two forms of fire are those which we experience in life through the emotions, and are similar to 'The flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame' spoken of in *The Monochord*.

The column behind the Sibyl is of a particularly strange appearance. It does not seem to be a column at all, but resembles more a Hindu lingam. This stone, as it surrounds the form of the Sibyl, is representative of her. Baring and Cashford write: 'There is also an identity with Cybele, for a stone was the epiphany of her presence and a cone-shaped stone or obelisk stood in all her temples'.² The poppies in the painting relate to Cybele, because they always grow in conjunction with corn.³ In Coopers *Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, under the entry for 'stone', there appears an illustration which bears a remarkable

¹ Son. 48, *Death-in-Love*.

² Op. cit., p.460.

³ The identification of the viewer with the cycle of the Corn-king is here made. Man's life is the grain that germinates in darkness, bursts into life in Spring, and is mown down in his maturity at harvest-time. However, his soul, which is symbolised by the seed, is sown again, and he is assured the promise of resurrection. Rossetti employs this motif throughout *The House of Life*, as I have shown earlier.

likeness to that stone behind the Sibyl; it is the Delphic *omphalos*, the 'navel of the world' about which the universe revolves. Cooper states: 'Tall, upright stones, columns and pillars are an *axis mundi*, which is also symbolised by the tree, or mountain, or tree on a mountain, or a column with a tree on it, and represent the supreme support of all things in the universe; they are also an omphalos, a fixed point or centre where man can regain Paradise, or find enlightenment'. He further adds:

Beatyls [holy or magical stones, usually of a meteoric origin] are also prophetic stones, 'stones that speak', from which comes the voice of the divinity or oracle, such as the omphalos at Delphi. These stones have usually fallen from heaven and can be either the dwelling place of the divinity or its aniconic representation.

The stone is the *petra genetrix*, 'the mother rock'. Such stones are usually black in colour, and represent the body of the Earth-goddess in the form of the Black Virgin (e.g. the black stone of Cybele).¹ Here, Rossetti shows the stone illuminated in half-light, half-shadow, which bears no apparent relationship with any sources of light within (or without) the picture area. The burning lamp, for instance, although it illuminates the carving of Love, does not light the stone. And again, on the other side the stone is peculiarly spotlighted as though from a shaft of light originating somewhere beyond the picture area on the right. Truth to Nature is of no concern to Rossetti when he handles light; he rather uses it as a tool to express his meaning. The stone, as I have said earlier, is a representation of the Goddess, and the lighting illustrates her characteristic nature of light and darkness, or more specifically, the range of correspondent dualities which reside in her. The paradox of light in darkness and darkness in light is further added to by the duality of Love and Death behind her. We have seen this expressed in *Death in Love*; 'a veiled woman followed ... "I and this Love are one, and I am Death"'. This is countered in such sonnets as *Through Death to Love*, and *Life in Love*. The Goddess encompasses both Love and Death, light and darkness, and the passage of the soul between these states. In this may be seen the alchemical resolution of opposites, and the stone as the Stone of the Philosophers. It is also

¹ In Wolfram's *Parzival*, the Grail takes the form of a stone.

the Grail in those stories which feature the Grail as a stone. In Rossetti's painting the stone bears carvings; that on the lighted side is of the sphinx, while that on the shaded side is too indeterminate to be clear; it appears to be a winged monster with three skull-like heads. On top of the stone is a green wreath. The symbolism of Sonnet 59, *Love's Last Gift* is here invoked, in which solar Love's year-cycle is conflated with the life-cycle of man: 'Only this laurel dreads no winter days: / Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise.'

The Sibyl herself wears a red gown with a black scarf around her head. While the colour of her gown indicates that she is the Rose herself, she is also the Palm, the Tree of Life. Graves writes:

Its poetic connexion with birth is that the sea is the Universal Mother and that the palm thrives close to the sea... The palm is the Tree of Life in the Babylonian Garden of Eden story. Its Hebrew name was 'Tamar' - Tamar was the Hebrew equivalent of the Great Goddess Istar or Ashtaroth [Astarte]; and the Arabians adored the palm of Nejran as a goddess, annually draping it with women's clothes and ornaments.¹

Baring and Cashford write, 'The Tree of Life was one of the primary images of the goddess herself, in whose immanent presence all pairs of opposites are reconciled'.²

The palm is also intimately connected with the phoenix, for it is in the palm that this bird, symbol of revivification and regeneration, enacts its conflagration. The phoenix is a symbol of the Sun-god, and as the palm represents the Earth-goddess, we see that we here again encounter the concept of the Sun being constantly reborn as the fruit of the Tree of Life.³ Many of these ideas are found in this prayer in a twelfth century English herbal:

¹ *White Goddess*, p.190.

² *Op. cit.*, p.496.

³ Wigston writes, *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, p.97: 'In Christian symbolism, the Tree of Life is the date palm, and souls are represented, commonly, as doves. On one of these palm trees is very commonly perched a phoenix with a glory of seven rays. ...the phoenix with the glory symbolises the resurrection to eternal life, and is placed on the palm tree as the symbolical support of that life.' Graves writes, *White Goddess*, p.190, 'The palm, the birth-tree of Egypt, Babylonia, Arabia and Phoenicia, gives its name *phoenix* ('bloody') to Phoenicia, which formerly covered the whole Eastern Mediterranean, and to the Phoenix which is born and reborn in a palm'.

Earth, divine goddess, Mother Nature, who dost generate all things and bringest forth ever anew the sun which thou hast given to the nations; Guardian of sky and sea and of all Gods and powers; through thy influence all nature is hushed and sinks to sleep.... Again, when it pleases thee, thou sendest forth the glad daylight and nuturest life with thine eternal surety.¹

In Swinburne's *Tenebrae*, the life of man is symbolically described in the terms we have been discussing. Here he adds a Rosicrucian overtone: 'the blossom of man from his tomb / Yearn open, the flower that survives' (st.19), and the Goddess as 'She, sole mother and maker,' the 'Spirit, and saviour, and life' (st.27):

'Seeing each life given is a leaf [petal]
Of the manifold multiform flower,
And the least among these, and the chief,
As an ear in the red-ripe sheaf
Stored for the harvesting hour.

'O spirit of man, most holy,
The measure of things and the root,
In our summers and winters a lowly
Seed, putting forth of them slowly
Thy supreme blossom and fruit;

'In thy sacred and perfect year,
The souls that were parcel of thee
In the labour and life of us here
Shall be rays of thy sovereign sphere,
Springs of thy motion shall be.

¹ Ibid, p.73.

‘There is the fire that was man,
The light that was love, and the breath
That was hope ere deliverance began,
And the wind that was life for a span,
And the birth of new things, which is death. (Sts.20-23)

In the foregoing paintings, we have been charting the course of the soul through its various passages of existence. In these, it has encountered some of the terrifying aspects of the Goddess. In the painting *The Blessed Damozel*, 1875-8¹ (Fig.52), we are presented with a vision of the soul’s fulfilment. While Rossetti’s poem dates from the days of his youth,² this painting was executed late in his career and represents the height of his mature style. This difference in years has produced a great disparity between what we read in the poem and the image as we see it on the canvas. The poem of *The Blessed Damozel* is undoubtedly Rossetti’s best known piece of verse, and has about it a certain child-like innocence of vision. The painting, however is laden with Rossetti’s late-style Italianate symbolism with its Renaissance references, and contains anything but a child-like innocence of vision.

In the poem, Rossetti skilfully disguises the Blessed Damozel as a handmaiden of God. In the later painting such disguise is altogether abandoned. In the poem, ‘the rampart of God’s house’ (st.5) stands over the abyss of the universe (sts.5 & 6). The Damozel leans over ‘the gold bar of Heaven’ (st.1), ‘Out of the circling charm’ (st.8), down at her lover far down below on the earth; ‘Surely she leaned o’er me - her hair / Fell all about my face’ (st.4). The nature of the Damozel is hinted at in the poem; she wears seven stars in her hair, and carries three lilies: ‘she spoke as when / The stars sang in their spheres’ (st.9), and ‘Her voice was like the voice the stars / Had when they sang together’ (st.10). The reference to

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 244, plate 355. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

² It was written in 1847, when Rossetti was 19: *Designer and Writer*, pp.125-6.

seven stars in her hair and the stars of the spheres confirms that she is the Queen of Heaven who presides over the Ptolemaic universe. In the painting we see her very much as she appears in *La Ghirlandata*, wearing a green robe and with copper-coloured hair. Around her head are the stars. Below her are three angels with green wings and holding sprays of palm. She is bounded by roses on each side. She carries a trinity of lunar lilies for virginity in her arms. She is herself the Lily and the Rose, as is the Bride of Lebanon, both in the Song and in Rossetti's painting. These are all symbols with which we are now familiar. Below her, in the predella to the painting, is the lover who gazes up towards her heaven. He is surrounded by the symbols of material Nature: the water of sublunary generation, and the trees of matter (*hyle*), which are the earthly representation of the Tree of Life in heaven;

We two will lie i' the shadow of
 That living mystic tree
 Within whose secret growth the Dove
 Is sometimes felt to be,
 While every leaf that His plumes touch
 Saith His Name audibly.

(st.15)

The Damozel is the Goddess of generation. She is the Lily and the Rose. She is Victory the palm-giver. She is Platonic Beauty who draws the heart of the lover upwards towards her, and for whom he longs. She is Beatrice. All these ideas culminate in the painting of *The Blessed Damozel*.

Having understood these correspondences, we may now turn to the frontispiece of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris Scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technica Historia*, 1617, entitled *Integrae Naturae Speculum Artisque Imago* (*The Mirror of the Whole of Nature and the Image of Art*) (Fig.53). In this extraordinarily detailed print, the Virgin of Nature, shown as a naked woman crowned with stars, is set against the background of Fludd's vision of the Ptolemaic universe. At the top God's hand emerges from a cloud, holding the top link of a chain that descends to the right-hand of Nature. In

her left hand she holds the top link of a chain that descends to an ape sitting on the globe of the world. The chains represent the *Aurea Catena* of Homer (Fig.54), in which the influence of God passes down through successive links to the Virgin of Nature. Fludd comments on this illustration:

She is not a goddess, but the proximate minister of God, at whose behest she governs the subcelestial worlds. In the picture she is joined to God by a chain, or the Invisible Fire of Heraclitus and Zoroaster. It is she who turns the sphere of the stars and disposes the planetary influences to the elemental realms, nourishing all creatures from her bosom.¹

We can see that this may be how Rossetti intends *The Blessed Damozel* to be understood. It is also how Dante describes Beatrice:

According to Ptolemy, (and also to the Christian verity,) the revolving heavens are nine; and according to the common opinion among astrologers, these nine heavens together have influence over the earth. Wherefore it would appear that this number was thus allied unto her for the purpose of signifying that, at her birth, all these nine heavens were at perfect unity with each other as to their influence. ...and according to the infallible truth, this number was her own self.²

The Virgin of Nature is the active tool of the intellect of God - his Anima. As such she also corresponds to the Shekinah (Wisdom as the Bride of God) in the Cabala.³

¹ Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd: Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of Two Worlds* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala, 1979), p.22. Godwin adds that the chain is Homer's *Aurea Catena*.

² *Works*, II, 77.

³ Waite writes, in *Hermetic Papers of AE Waite*, p.167: 'She is clothed with the sun, and this signifies that she is the Moon in astronomical symbolism, being also the Queen of Heaven. Her light comes from the Eternal. ... Below she is pictured as the personified Spirit of the universe. She is Virgin, Bride and Mother, because she is the splendour of purity in all her states and planes. She is *Anima Mundi*; Divine Immanence in Malkuth, as she is the Spirit which leads to the recognition of these in unity. ...she is the creation adorned with the perfection of its beginning, [and] it must be said that she is her own builder, or the power behind the manifest. For us, however, and for our concerns, she is the restorer of worlds.' She is Isis as the Temple of Nature 'in which God is manifested to man': p.168. As the alchemist succeeds in his

The figure of the Ape of Nature, writes Godwin, is ‘Art, who has arisen from human ingenuity’, and ‘forms the terminus of the chain of being, bearing the same relation to Nature as she to God’.¹ Man and woman are shown at the top of the sphere of Animalia set adjacent to the sun and moon respectively in the spheres of the stars.

I turn to Rossetti’s drawing of Jane Morris entitled *Aurea Catena*, c.1868² (Fig.55). It was William who gave the picture its name as Doughty records, ‘*Aurea Catena* with its delicate bondage of the golden chain, a touch of symbolism upon which William Rossetti who gave the latter work its Latin title, consciously prided himself’.³ Thus we can safely assume that the figure of Jane sitting beneath a tree, and holding one end of the chain that loops around her neck, also corresponds to the figure of Virgin Nature who animates the material universe.

The Cabala was central to the Rosicrucian system, and Fludd was well versed in its use and symbolism, which he derived directly from Pico della Mirandola. The role of Virgin Nature in Fludd’s frontispiece directly corresponds with the Shekinah of the Cabala. Orthodox Judaism is strictly monotheistic; the One God does not exist as a trinity, but stands absolute. In esoteric Judaism, that is, in the Cabala, the Shekinah is viewed as an emanation of the Godhead, and is female. As Fludd states, ‘She is not a goddess’, but is rather the creative anima of the Godhead. It is the ten-fold descent of the Shekinah which constitutes the ten Sephiroth of the Cabala. This is directly comparable, as Pico realised, with the Platonic scheme based on the Pythagorean Tetractys. The ten Sephiroth of the Cabala represent an abstract symbol of the Tree of Life, from which they derive. The Sephiroth are said to spring from the womb of the Shekinah. Baring and Cashford write:

own transfiguration ‘the soul returns to God, [and] it takes Nature with it, but the archetypal Nature’, that is, Nature as the unfallen universe: p.169. This is the Rosicrucian restoration to Eden and the Adamic state.

¹ Loc. cit.

² Surtees Cat. no. 209, plate 297. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

³ *Victorian Romantic*, p.376. Surtees states, loc. cit., note 4, ‘The name was bestowed on the drawing by the artist’s brother at the time of Rossetti’s Sale.’ William would only have bestowed this name if he thought it fitting for one of his brother’s works and that he would have approved of it: it further shows that William was fully aware of the significance of the title, and of its appropriateness to Rossetti’s symbolic imagery.

Within the framework of Kabbalistic teaching the image of the Shekhinah, like that of Sophia, reaches far back into the foundations of the Bronze Age goddesses of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and also, later, to the images of Asherah and Astarte in Canaan.¹

‘The word *shekinah* derives from “dwelling place”’, writes Caitlin Matthews.² She adds, ‘The notion of a deity as a house or sanctuary is widespread among Middle Eastern Goddesses’.³ In this sense there is a direct relationship with Rossetti’s *House of Life*. Baring and Cashford write:

The Shekhinah was addressed as the ‘Mystical Eden’ - an enfolding presence, not a place - as well as the ‘holy apple garden’, the ‘great sea’ and the fountain that transmits life from the unmanifest source into manifestation.⁴

This fountain appears in *The Blessed Damoze!l*, stanzas 13-14:

I’ll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
And bathe there in God’s sight.

We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps are stirred continually
With prayer sent up to God.

¹ Op. cit., pp.638-9.

² Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia Goddess of Wisdom* (London: Aquarian Press, 1992), p. 115.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Op. cit., p.641.

The Cabalistic Shekinah adopts other forms in the Bible: she was exiled from Eden with Adam and Eve; she was the Bride of the Song of Songs, in which her blackness conceals her interior glory; it was she who dwelt in Solomon's Temple with the Ark of the Covenant; she was the pillar of fire and smoke which led the Israelites from Egypt; it was she who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai; and it was she who entered the Holy of Holies.¹ It will be noted that although she is figured in the Cabala as the abstract feminine creative emanation of God, she is in fact the earlier Mother and Fertility Goddess who has been absorbed into the male Godhead.² The Cabalistic Shekinah is to Judaism what the Virgin Mary was to Mediaeval Catholicism.

Returning to Rossetti's painting of *The Blessed Damozel*, we see that she is the goddess of the Rose-garden. Here she stands for the allegorical figure of Venus that we noted earlier in the *Roman de la Rose*. This must represent Rossetti's own vision of a return to Eden. It is his own personal counterpart of the Earthly Paradise on Mount Purgatory in which Dante found redemption. It is Rossetti's own dream for the future of his soul. It stands for his view of the afterlife of the soul with which he concludes *The House of Life*, but which is still expressed with some doubt:

When vain desire at last and vain regret
 Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,
 What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
 And teach the unforgetful to forget?
 Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet, -
 Or may the soul at once in a green plain
 Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain
 And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?

Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air
 Between the scripted petals softly blown

¹ Further information is to be found in Baring and Cashford, pp.638-43, and Matthews, pp.114-9

² Again, this may account for the male-female qualities in Hunt's *Light of the World* and Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca*.

Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown, -
Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er
But only the one Hope's one name be there, -
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.

In this sonnet, Rossetti takes the place of the man in the predella of *The Blessed Damozel*, who, gazing upward, dreams of his One Hope in the afterlife. This last sonnet of *The House of Life* is something of an enigma; Rossetti's final statement is in the form of a riddle. What is the 'one Hope's one name' that is found in the 'scriptured petals softly blown'? One's immediate answer is 'Jane', whose personal emblem was the pansy. But this is not a 'scriptured petal'.

A possible answer may be found in Canto XXIII of *Paradiso*:

Here is the Rose, wherein the Word of God (73)
Made itself flesh ...

The name of the fair flower, which day and night (88)
My lips continually invoke, compelled
My mind to gaze upon the greatest light.

The Rose is of course Mary, and these lines could be construed to contain Rosicrucian symbolism.

The probable answer lies, I believe, in Rossetti's poem *Love-Lily*, the words of which seem a direct response to *The One Hope*. This poem had originally been entitled *Dark Lily*, and its subject was Jane. The image is obviously lunar, the white face among the dark waves of hair. This seems to have a direct relationship with the imagery of the Canticles, in which the Beloved states: 'I am the rose of Sharon, / And the lily of the valleys'. The Beloved as the Lily and the Rose is also the imagery of the painting of *The Blessed Damozel*. There is a single head study of *The Blessed Damozel*, which was cut down from

an unfinished version, and renamed *Sancta Liliās*.¹ These are the last two stanzas of *Love-Lily* which answer the riddle posed by *The One Hope*:

Within the voice, within the heart,
 Within the mind of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born who lifts apart
 His tremulous wings and looks at me;
Who on my mouth his finger lays,
 And shows, while whispering lutes confer,
That Eden of Love's watered ways
 Whose winds and spirits worship her.

Brows, hands, and lips, heart, mind, and voice,
 Kisses and words of Love-Lily, -
Oh! bid me with your joy rejoice
 Till riotous longing rest in me!
Ah! let not hope be still distraught,
 But find in her its gracious goal,
Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought
 Nor Love her body from her soul.

¹ Surtees Cat. no. 244 C, plate 358. Tate Gallery. A certain flaw is inherent in this argument, in that the model for *The Blessed Damozel* was Alexa Wilding, and not Jane. However, from Rossetti's first meeting with Jane in Oxford in 1857, until the time of his death in 1882, Jane remained his 'one hope'.

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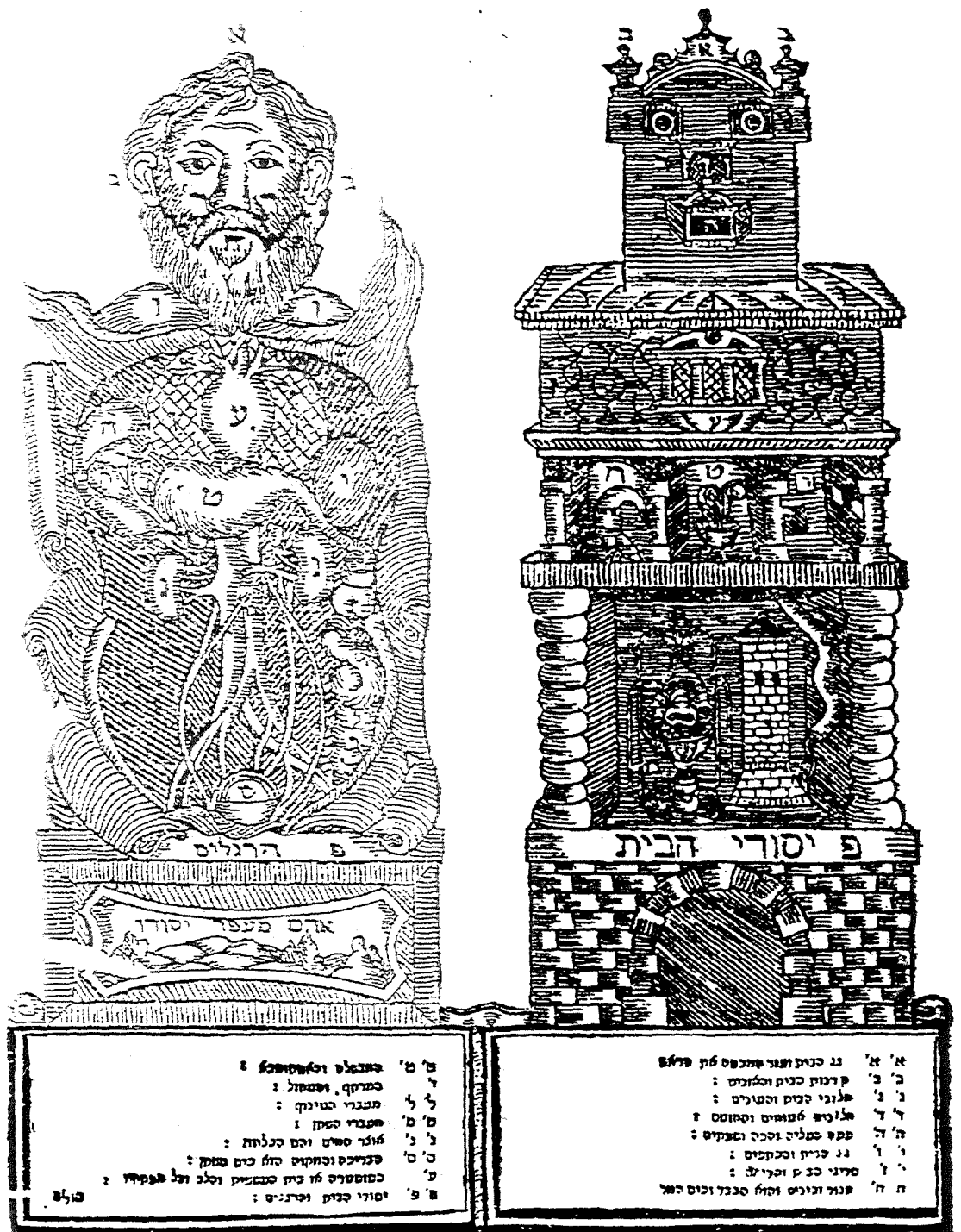
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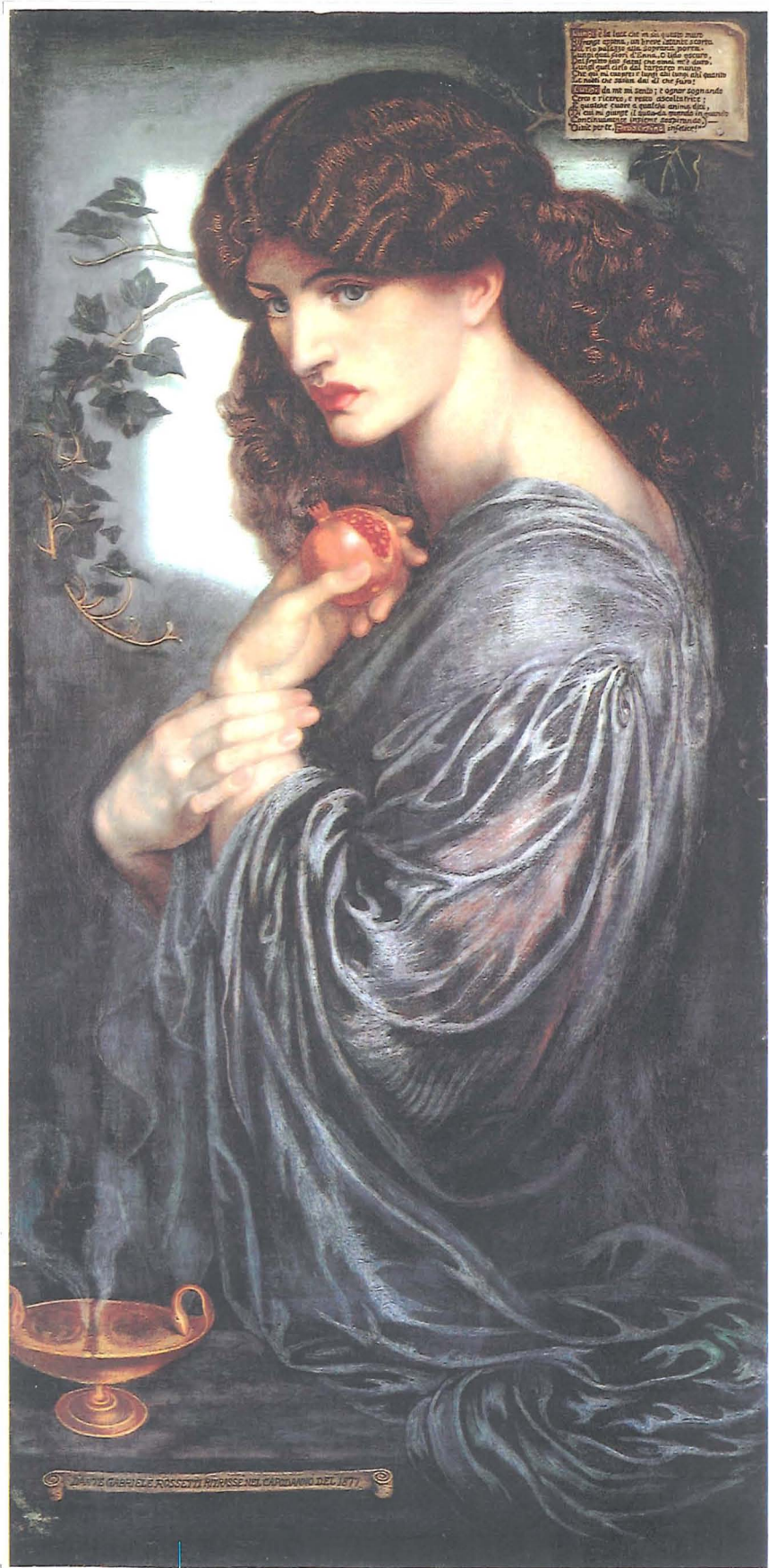
1. Cabala and the Human Body as the House of Life, from Tobias Cohn's *Ma'aseh Tobiyyah*, 1721, Venice. Charles Walker Collection.



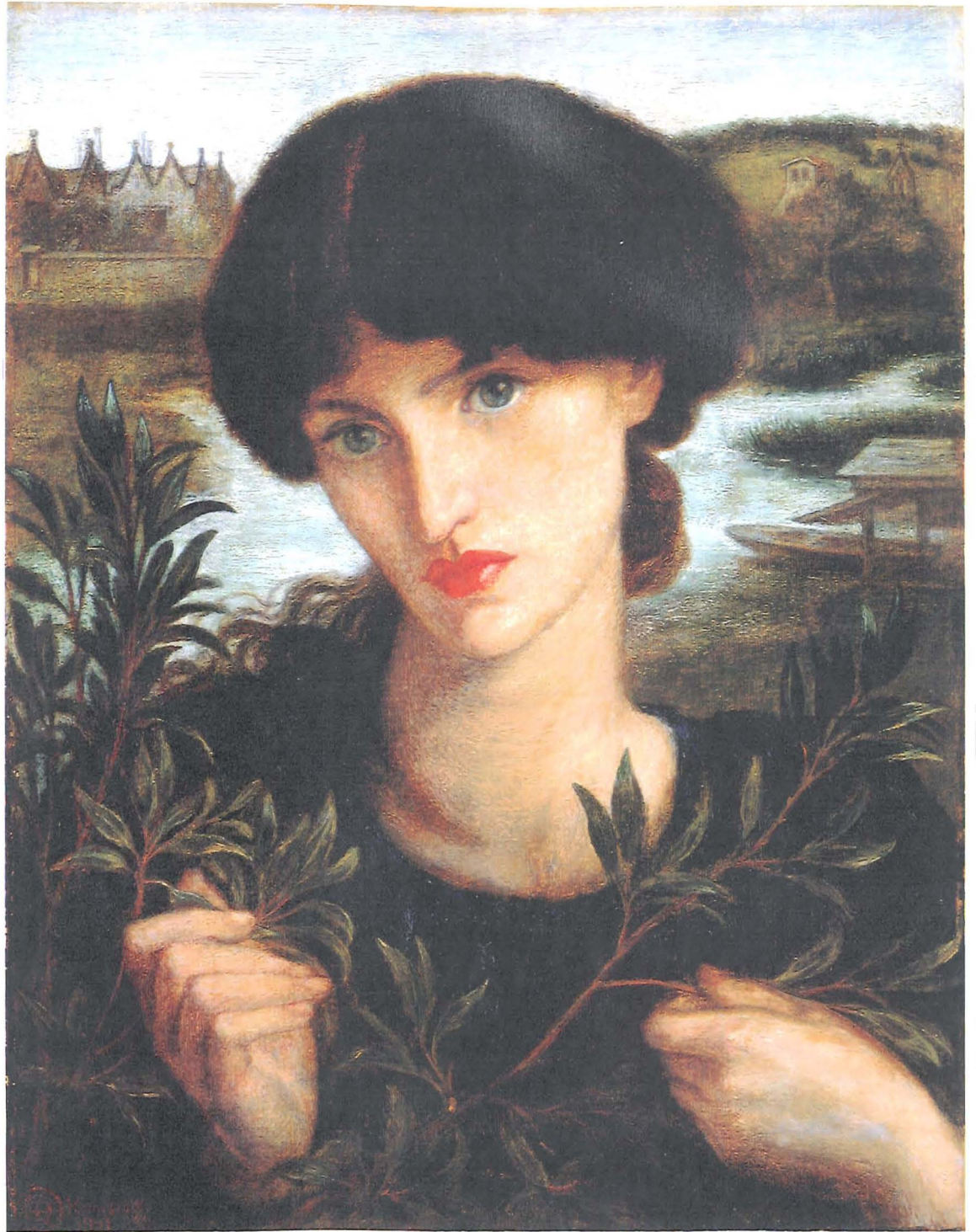
2. *The Sonnet*, 1880. Pen and ink.



3. Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852. Oil. Tate Gallery.



4. *Proserpine*, 1877. Oil. Private collection.



5. *Water Willow*, 1871. Oil. Bancroft Memorial Collection, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.



6. *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*, 1871. Oil. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



7. *The Roseleaf*, 1870. Pencil. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



8. Studies for *Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael*, 1857.

(Left) Watercolour. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

(Right) Pen and ink. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.



9. *A Vision of Fiammetta*, 1878. Oil. Private collection.



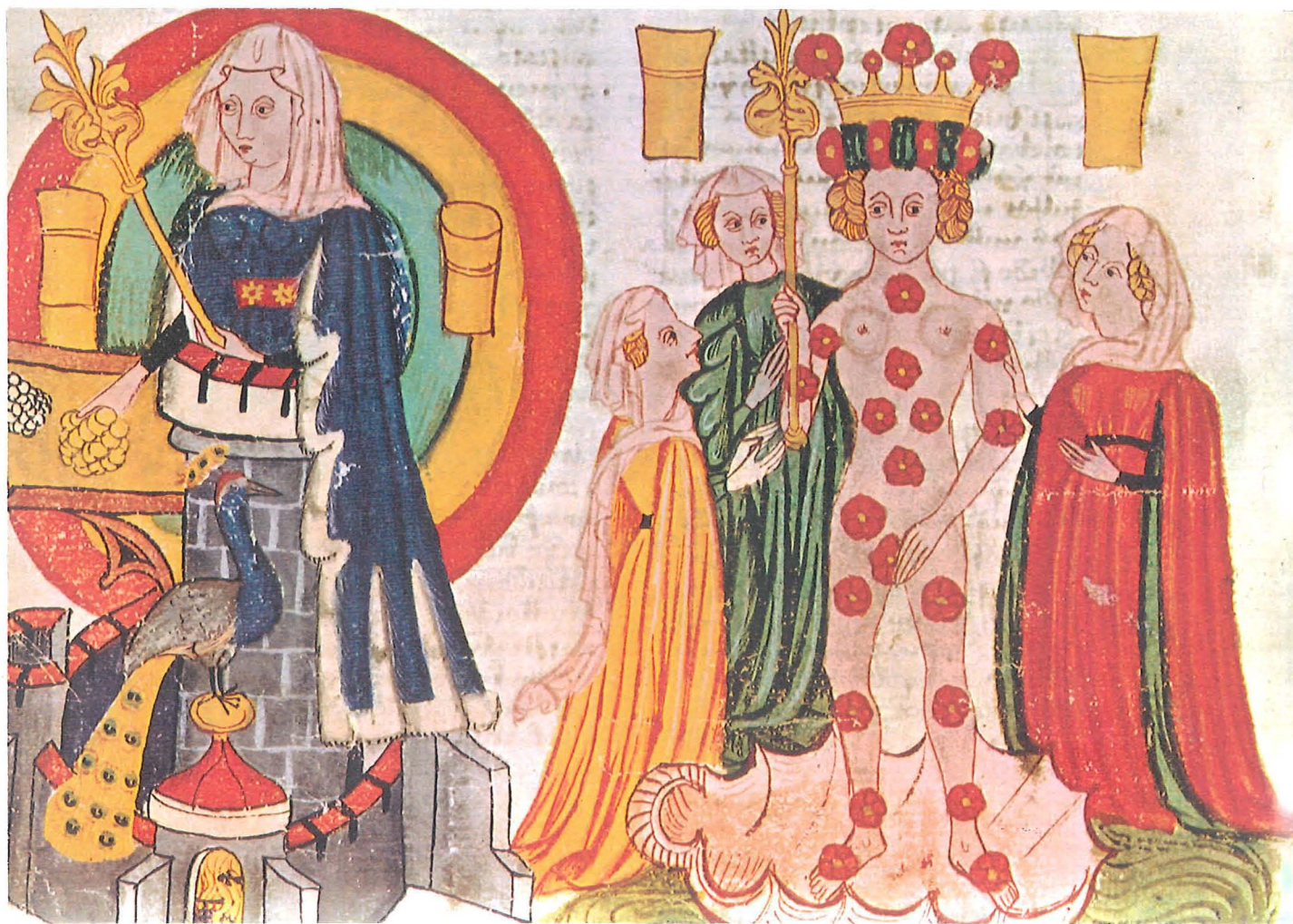
10. *The Day Dream*, 1880. Oil. Victoria and Albert Museum.



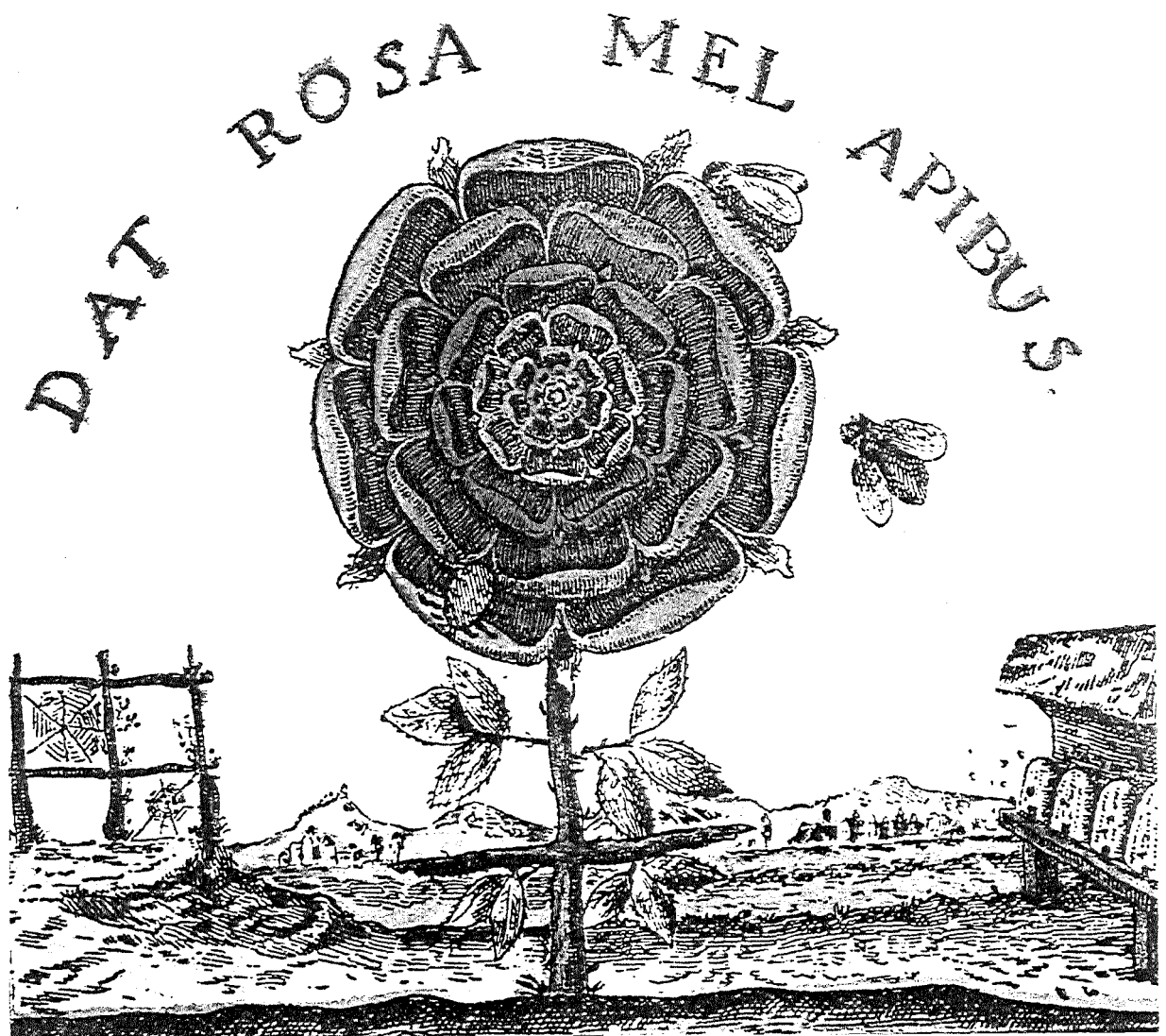
11. *La Pia de Tolomei*, 1868-80. Oil.
Spencer Museum of Art, University
of Kansas, Lawrence.



12. *Roman de la Rose*, 1864. Watercolour. Tate Gallery.



13. Alchemical Venus with roses. On the left is Lady Alchymia as Iris, the rainbow, with a peacock. Anon., 15th century, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.



14. The Rosicrucian Rose-Cross, from the title page of *Summum Bonum: The True Magic, Cabala, and Alchemy, of the True Fraternity of the Rose Cross*, Frankfurt, 1629.



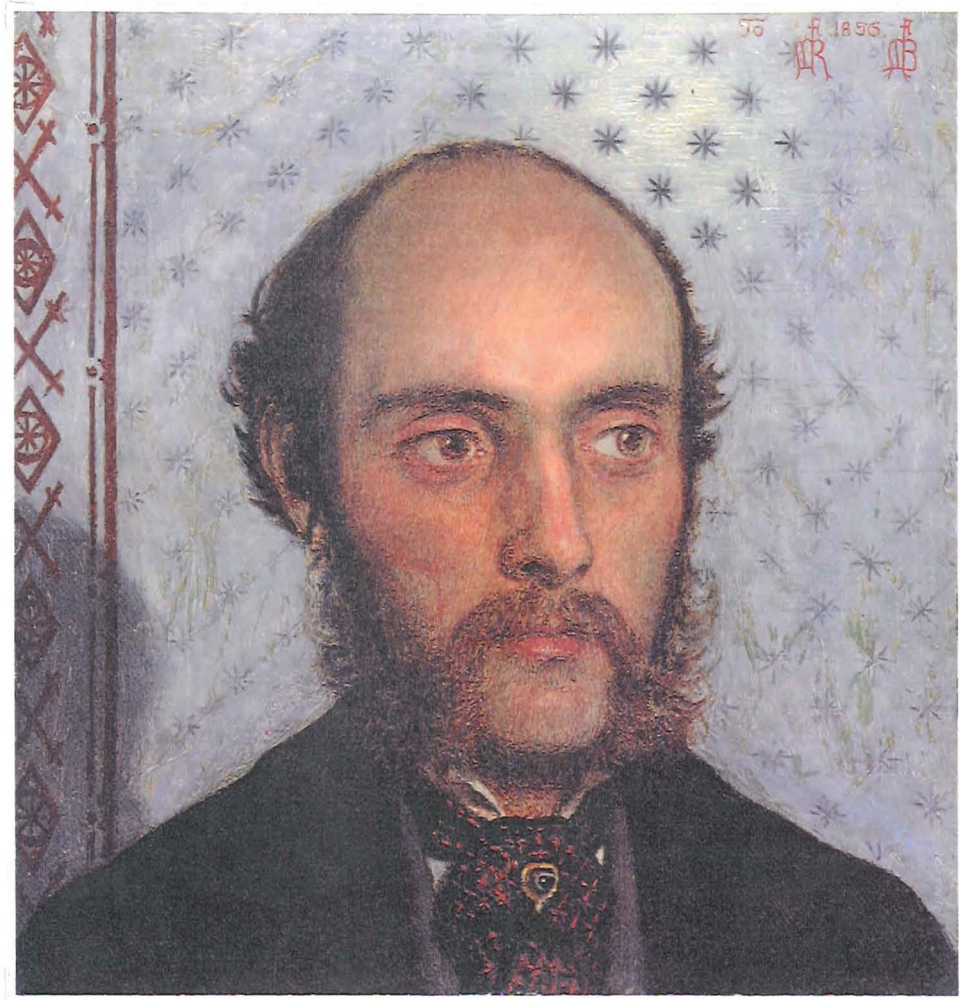
15. Ford Madox Brown, *Our Ladye of Saturday Night*, 1847-61. Watercolour. Tate Gallery.



16. Ford Madox Brown, *Take Your Son, Sir*, unfinished, 1851. Oil. Tate Gallery.



17. Margaret Macdonald, *The Heart of the Rose*, 1901. Gesso relief. Glasgow School of Art.



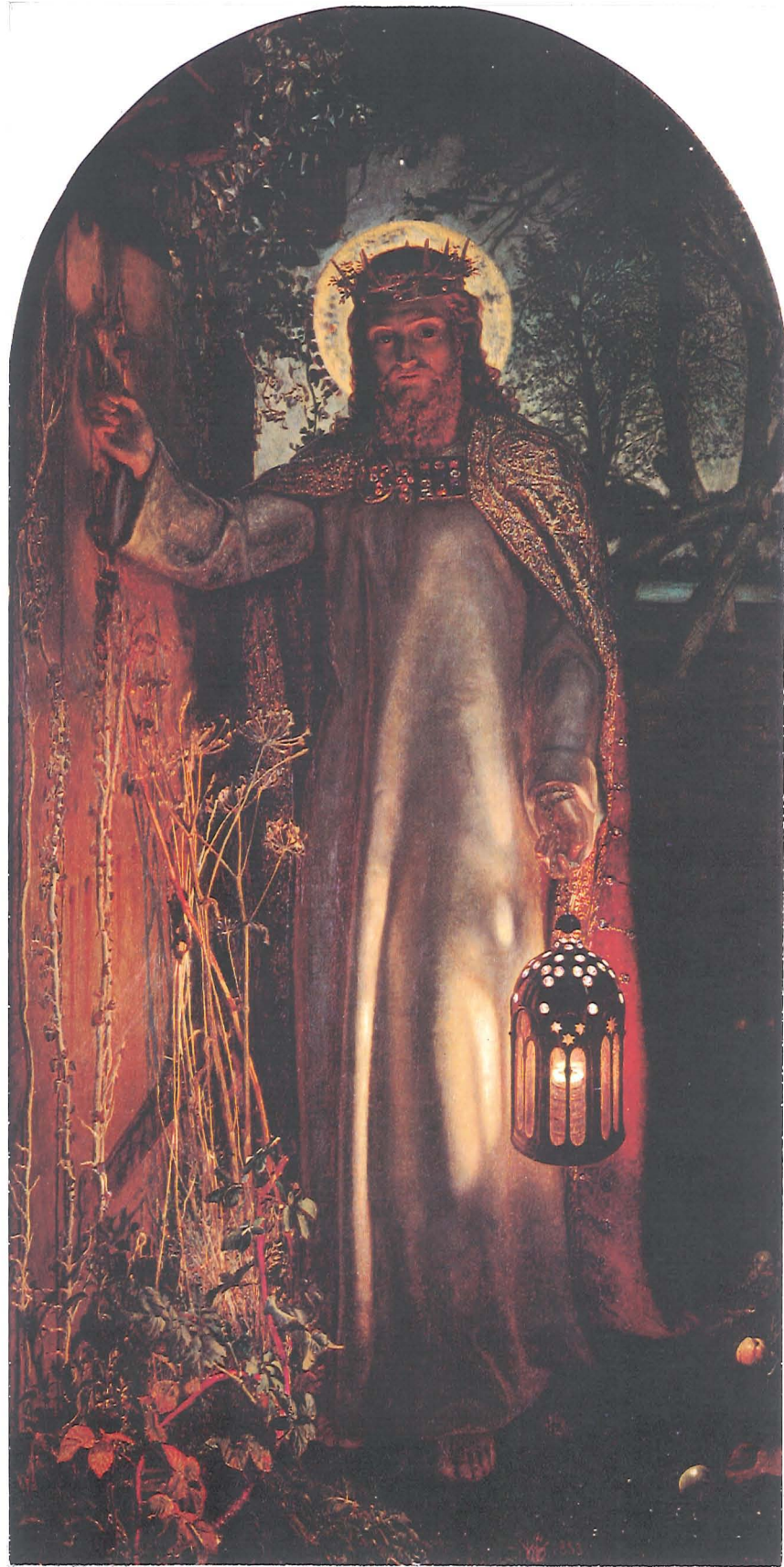
18. Ford Madox Brown, *William Michael Rossetti, Painted by Lamplight*, 1856. Oil.
National Trust, Wightwick Manor.

19. Holman Hunt,
The Hireling Shepherd,
1851-2. Oil. City of
Manchester Art Galleries.





20. Holman Hunt, *The Afterglow in Egypt*, 1854, 1860-3. Oil. Southampton Art Gallery.



21. Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World*, 1851-3. Oil. Keble College, Oxford.

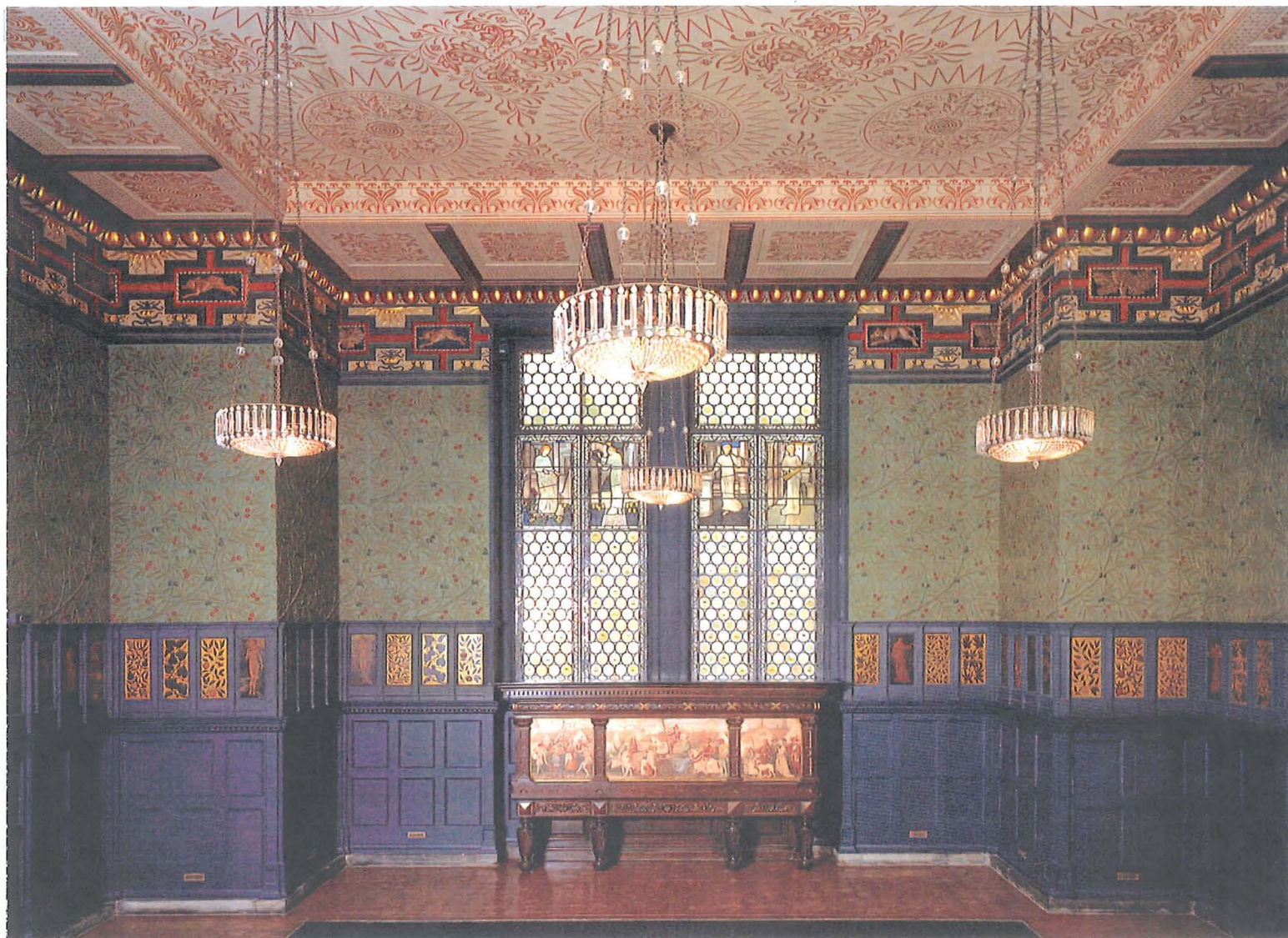


22. Millais, *Autumn Leaves*, 1855-6. Oil. City of Manchester Art Galleries.



23. Millais, *Apple Blossoms (Spring)*, 1856-8. Oil. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.

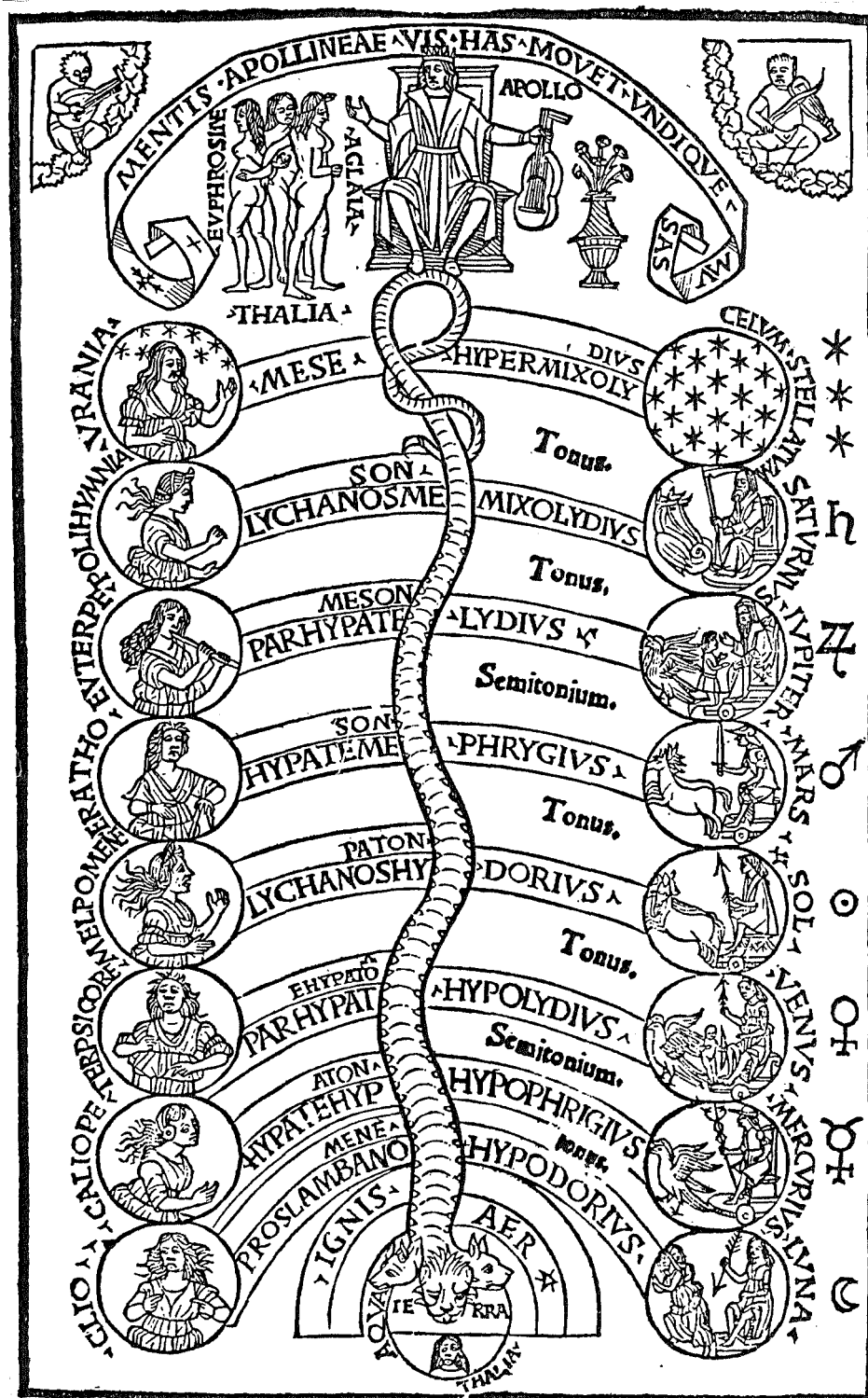
24. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner
& Co., The Green Dining Room,
South Kensington Museum,
opened in 1868.





25. William Morris and John Henry Dearle, *The Orchard or The Seasons*, 1890.

Tapestry. Victoria and Albert Museum.



27. The Music of the Spheres, from Franciscus Gafurius, *Practica Musice*, Florence, 1496.



28. *Veronica Veronese*, 1872. Oil. Bancroft Memorial Collection, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.



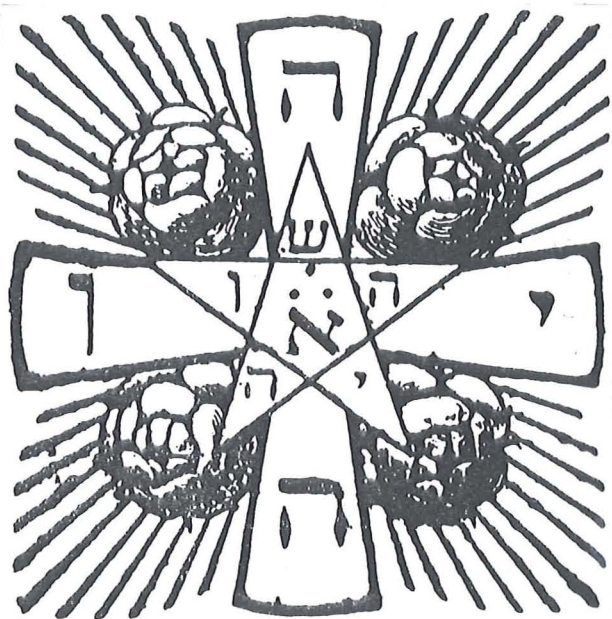
29. *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; But Sir Percival's Sister Died by the Way*, 1864. Watercolour. Tate Gallery.



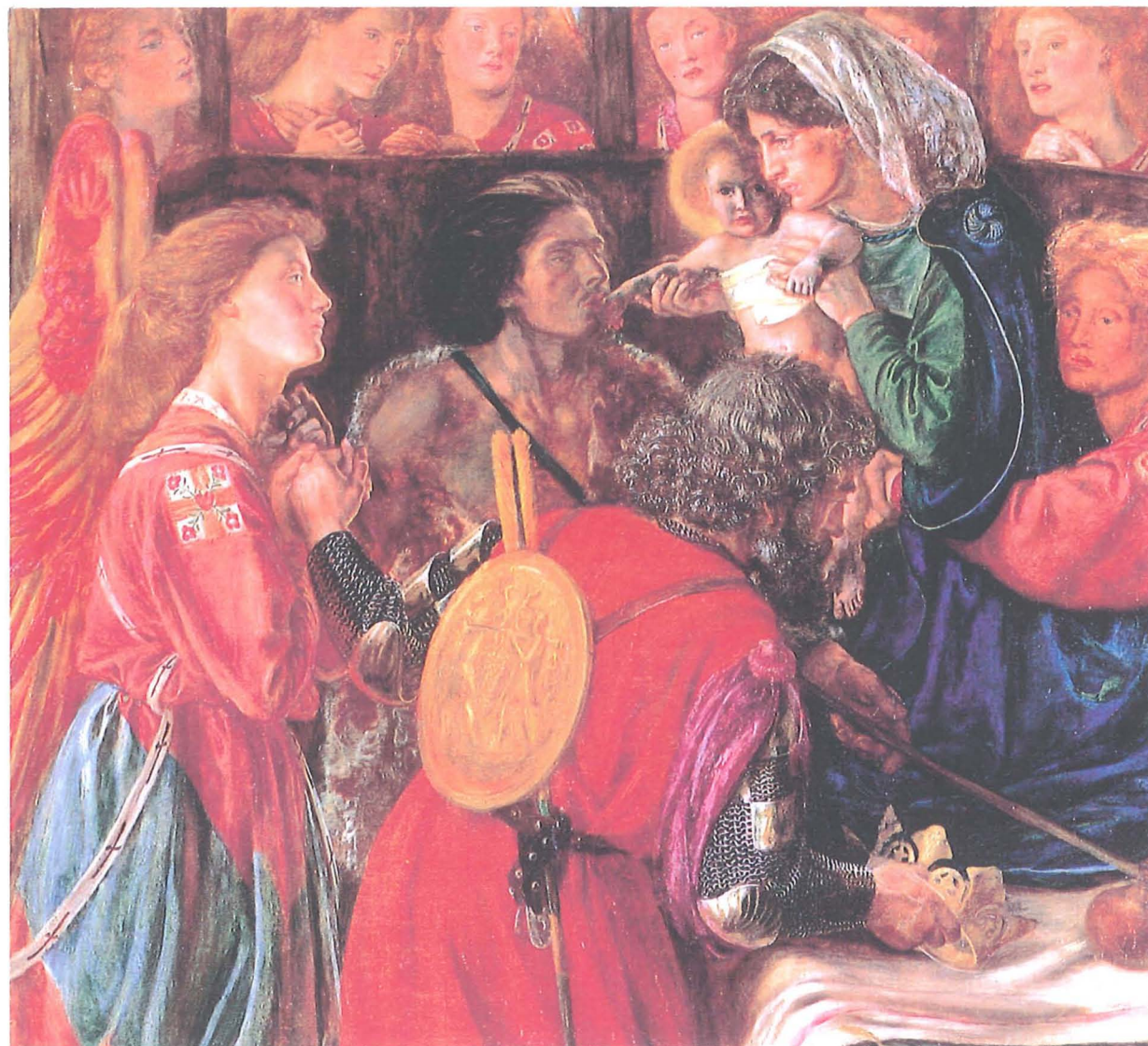
30. *Arthur's Tomb*, 1855. Watercolour. British Museum.



31. The Llandaff Triptych, *The Seed of David*, 1858-64. Oil. Llandaff Cathedral, Wales.



33. Emblem of the Kabalistic Order of the Rose+Cross, Paris, 1890s.



32. Detail of the central panel of *The Seed of David*.



34. *The Wedding of St George and Princess Sabra*, 1857. Watercolour. Tate Gallery.



35. Albrecht Durer, *The Birth of the Virgin*, c.1502-3. Woodcut.



36. *Dantis Amor*, 1860. Oil. Tate Gallery.



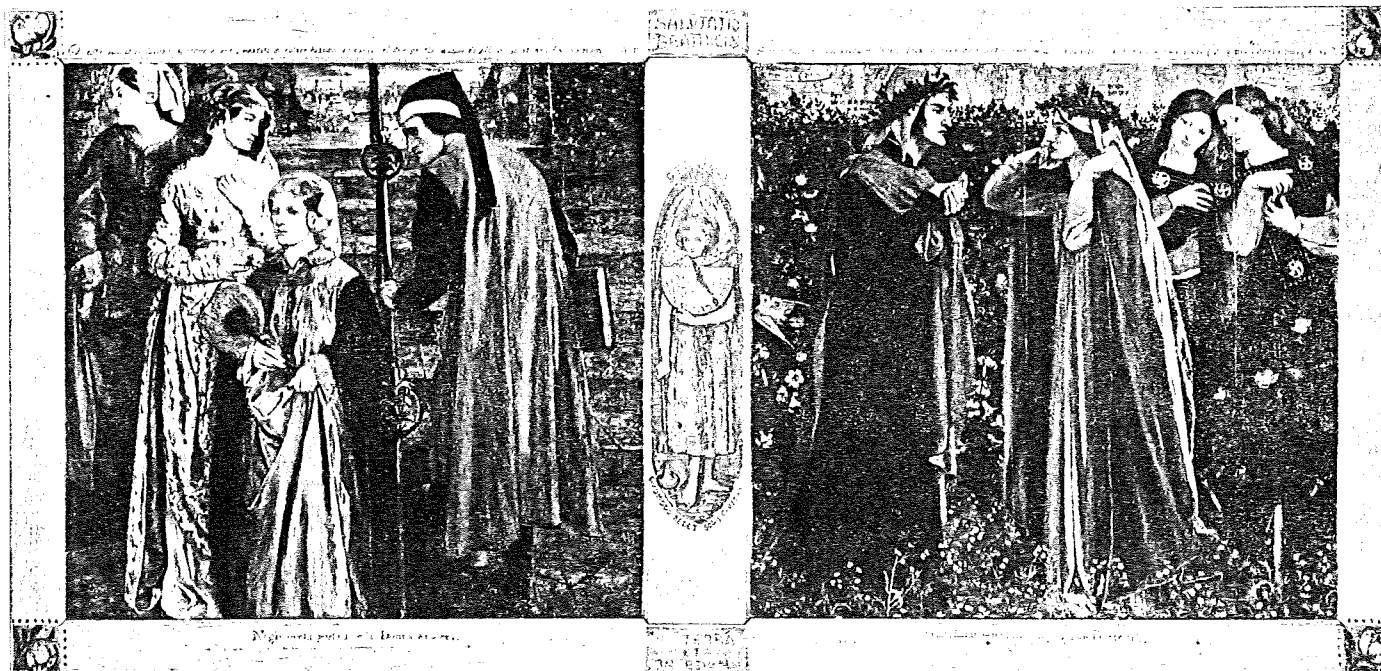
37. *St George and Princess Sabra*, 1862. Watercolour. Tate Gallery.



38. *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, 1858. Pen and ink. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



39. Detail of *Mary Magdalene*.



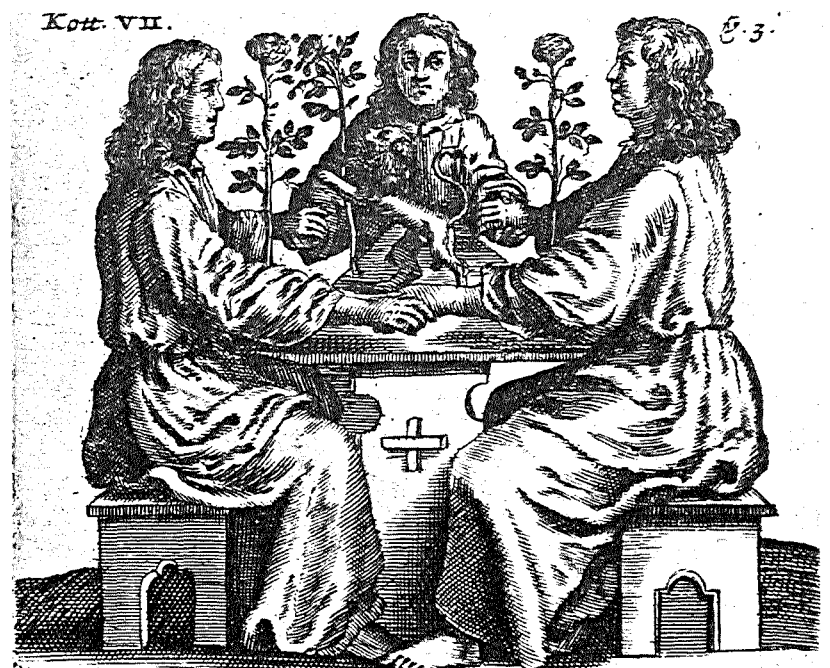
40. *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1859. Oil. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



41. *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, 1853. Watercolour. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



42. The Hermetic philosopher worshipping in his laboratory, from Heinrich Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae aeternae*, Hanover, 1609.



43. Study for *Rosa Triplex*, 1867. Coloured chalks. Tate Gallery.

44. Rosicrucian Angels with Roses, from Christopher Kotter, *Revelationes ... ab anno 1616 ad annum 1624*, in *Lux in tenebris*, 1665.



45. *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, 1849. Oil. Tate Gallery.



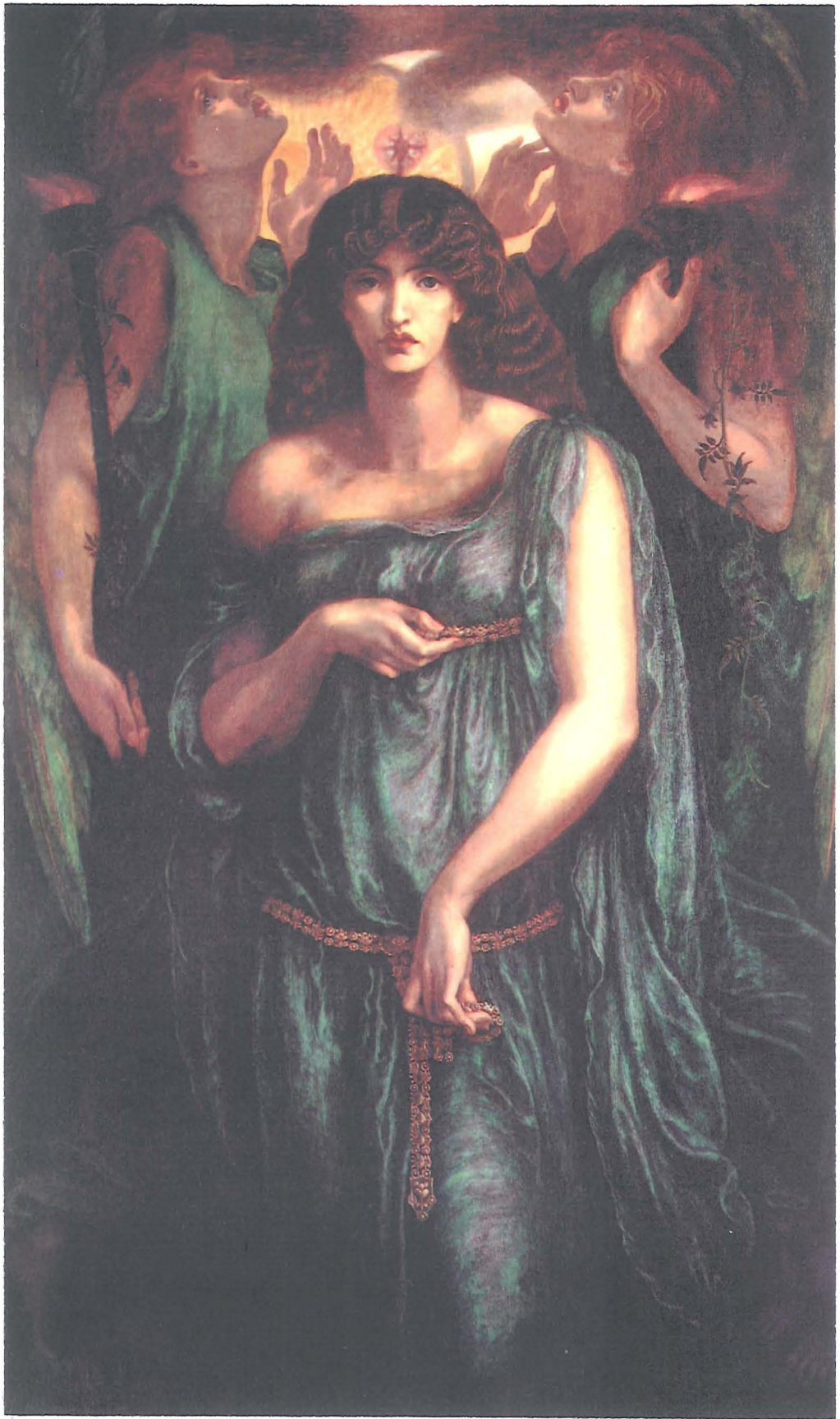
46. *Bocca Baciata*, 1859. Oil. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



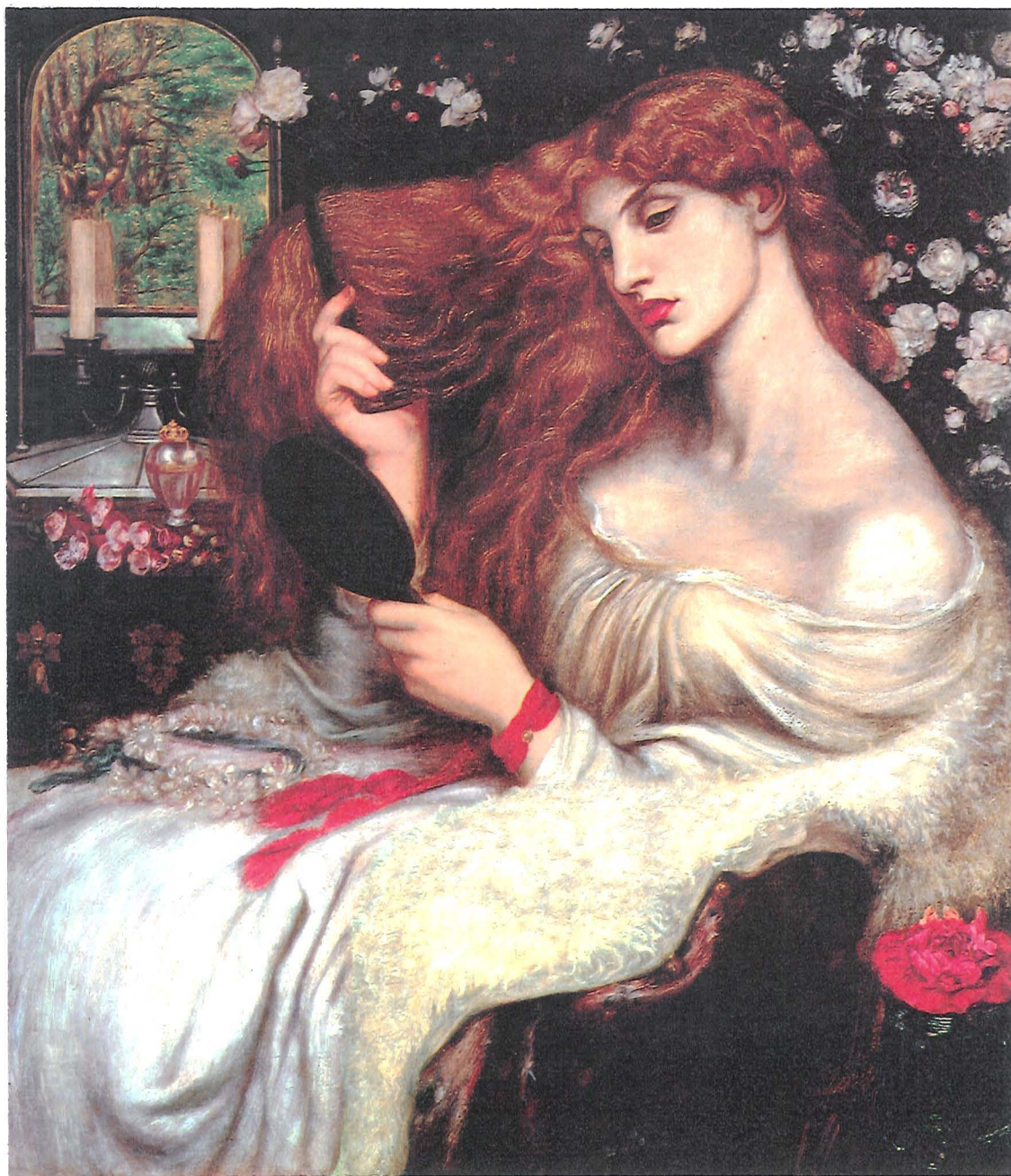
47. *La Ghirlandata*, 1873. Oil. Guildhall Art Gallery, London.



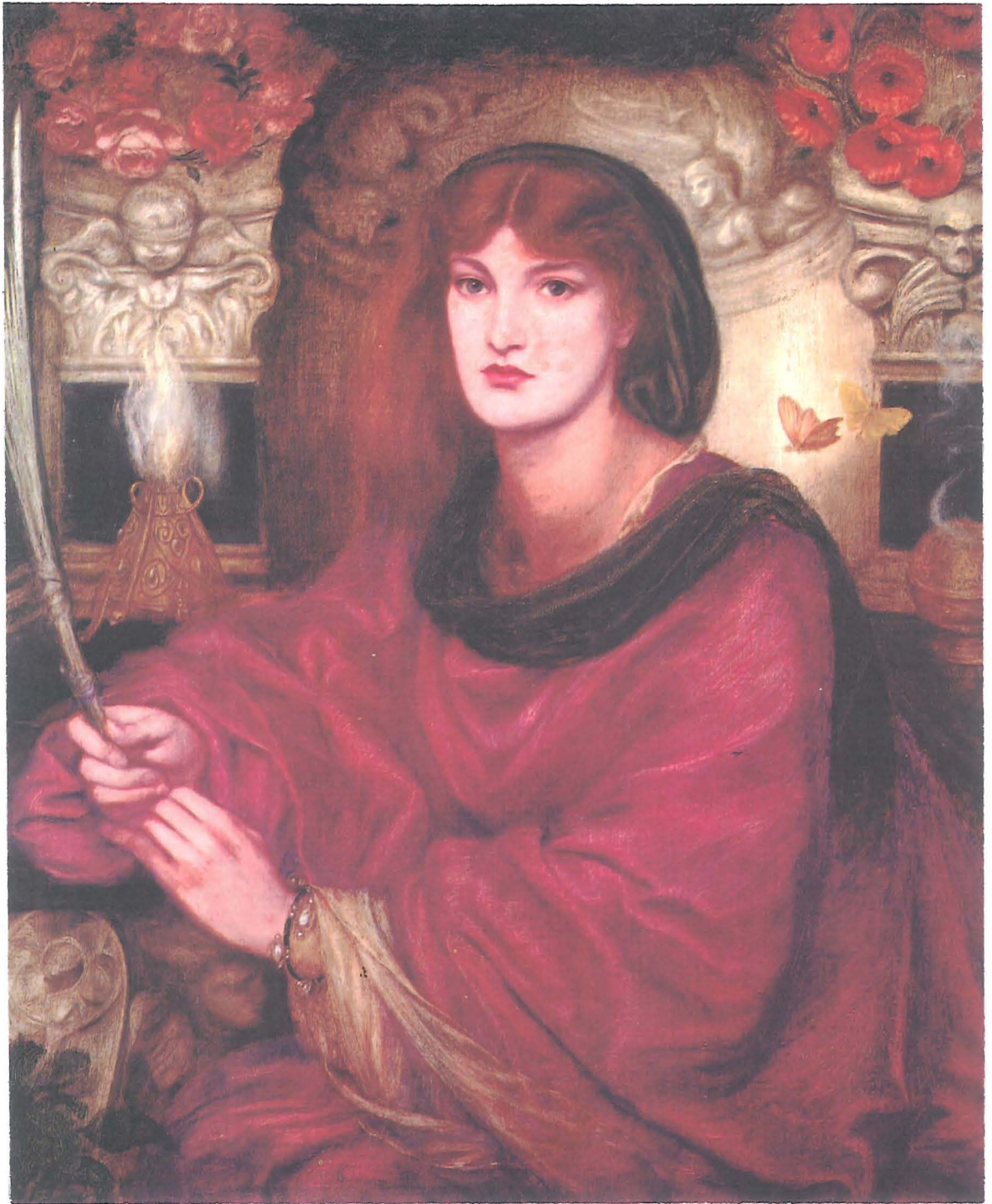
48. *The Beloved (The Bride)*, 1865-6. Oil. Tate Gallery.



49. *Astarte Syriaca*, 1877. Oil. Manchester City Art Galleries.



50. *Lady Lilith*, 1868, repainted 1872-3. Oil. Bancroft Memorial Collection, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.



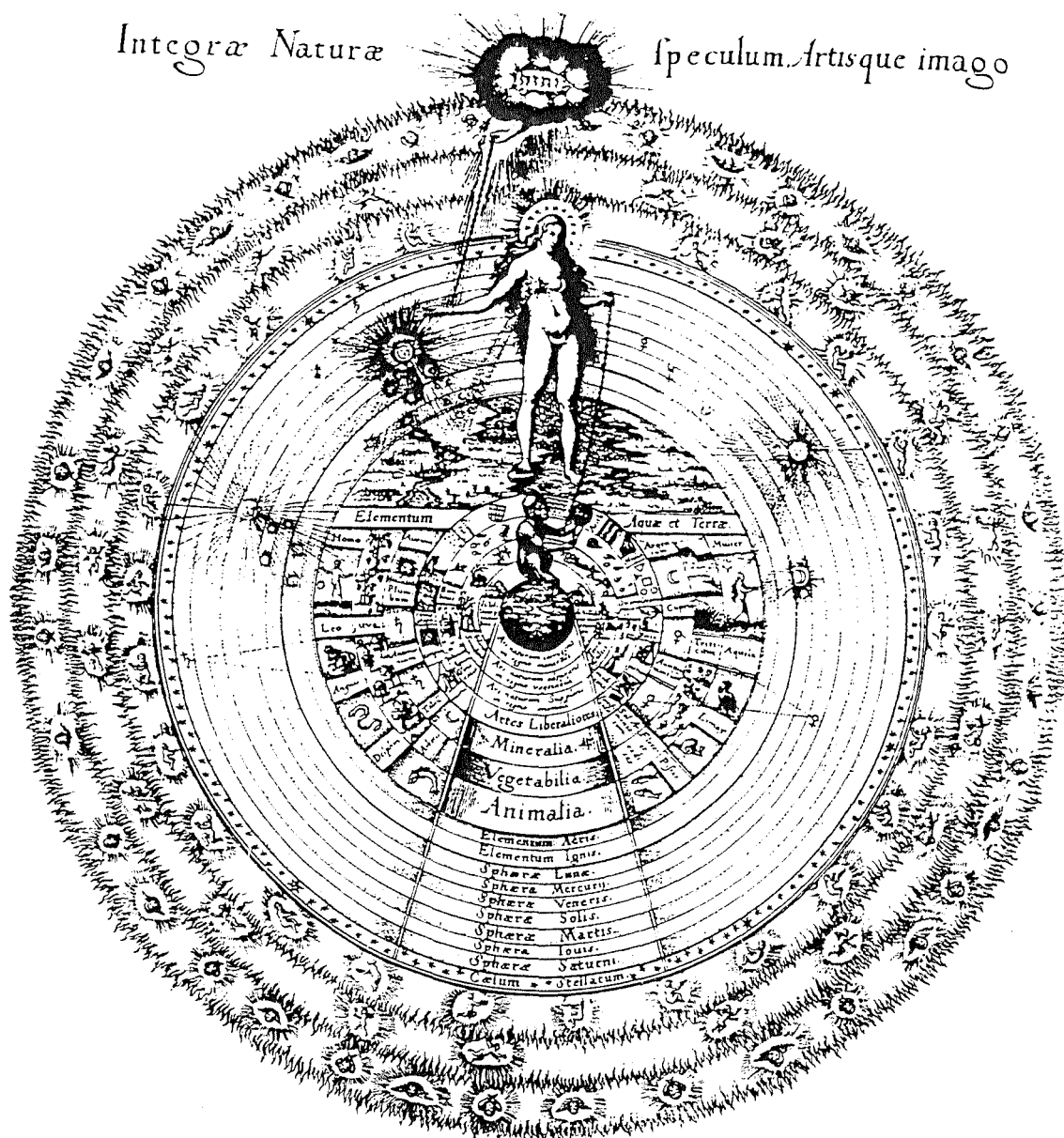
51. *Sibylla Palmifera*, 1866-70. Oil. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.



52. *The Blessed Damozel*, 1875-78. Oil. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

Integræ Naturæ

Speculum Artisque imago



53. Robert Fludd, *The Mirror of the Whole of Nature and the Image of Art*, from *Utriusque Cosmi ... Historia*, 1617.

Aurea Catena Homeri.

Annulus Platonicus.

Superius & Inferius
Hermetis.

Chaos		confusum.
Spiritus Mundi vo-		latilis incorporeus.
Spiritus Mundi		acidus corporeus.
Spiritus Mundi fixus		alcalicus corporeus.
Materia prima o-		mnium corporum
sublu-		narium.
Ani-		malia.
Vegetabilia,		seu Azoth.
Mine-		ralia.
Spiritus Mundi con-		centratus fixus seu
Extractum Chao-		ticum purum.
Perfectio consum-		mata, seu Quinta Es-
sentia Uni-		versalis.



55. *Aurea Catena*, 1868. Coloured chalks. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.